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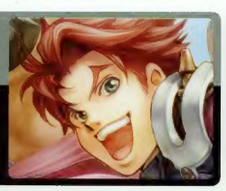
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Blood and Gore
Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence

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Letter from the Editor

The long and short of it

First off, I'd like to thank everyone who voiced their opinion on our ill-fated four-star review system, the vast majority of which liked it about as much as Batman: Dark Tomorrow. Save it to say, we've adopted plan B and gone to a standard 10-point system. At least you know we're listening.

Not a whole lot happening this month. EA didn't purchase any national pastimes (just the ESPN brand and Arena Football) and Microsoft didn't boot any great games to the curb (that we know of), so we're just kind of enjoying the first quarter lull, bracing ourselves for E3 and the subsequent changing of the guard as the next wave of consoles looms at the gate.

What a perfect opportunity to speak to the din over game length. It seems everywhere you turn, someone is complaining about games being too short—ie Fable and Oddworld coming in under 20 hours, Star Fox Assault at under 10 and so on. My take is that games should be more about entertainment and replay value than about how many hours it takes to reach the end. The most legendary action games and shooters of the '80s and '90s were six-level, 2-3 hour affairs with adventures coming in at 8-10 on the long side. RPGs have remained 30–50 hrs, and action RPGs have always hovered between 15-25… So when did a 6-hour-long, vastly replayable shooter like Star Fox Assault become regarded as short, along with adventures as vast and epic as Oddworld or Fable at just under 20? My first time through Fable, sticking to the core missions while soaking up a fair amount of ambience, came in under 20, but my current game (which has been a wildly different experience) is into the 30s. The mark of a good game is how much you want to go back and for how long, not how many hours it takes you to finish. I can beat Gunstar Heroes in a couple of hours, but I've played it at least twice a year since 1993.

Taking into account how expensive and time-consuming modern 3D game design has become, I'm humbled by how much content we're getting out of games these days. A 40-hour-long mission-to-mission game like Fable would take six years to develop—longer than the lifecycle of most consoles—and do we really need 40-hour-long action-RPGs or shooters and action games over 10 hours long? I'll take a great 5-10-hour-long game that I only have to wait 18 months for over some bogged-down, artificially long game any day of the week. Throughout history, the greatest games have been measured by one thing: fun. I think it's time we critics started praising games for what they do right, not look for ways to break them down. Game creation is too tough a job to look at things any other way.

"The mark of a good game is how much you want to go back and for how long, not how many hours it takes you to finish."

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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Suggestive Themes, Violence

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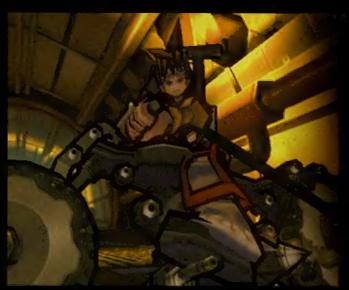
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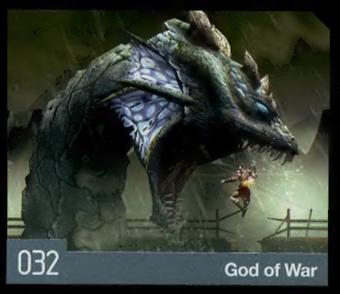
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Violence


PlayStation 2

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Strange Rewards

Having just finished Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath on Xbox, a somber sensation came over me. I couldn't put my finger on it at first because honestly I had just had myself a wonderful time. The game was beautiful, fun and exciting all at once, but still something was wrong. I realized that it was all over relatively quickly and frankly the game offered me little reason to go back in. There was no incentive to carry on once again. No alternate ending possibilities. No great reward for catching bounties alive since midway thru you are all but stripped of your earlier accomplishments. Nothing to motivate me to replay what I had already done. Now I am a firm believer in the single-player experience. I get more thrills and chills from a good yarn about some fantastic story than I do fragging friends in multiplayer titles. But I still have to ask, is it OK for games to not reward the player in some fashion for excelling in one way or another in a single-player game? Resident Evil 4 was fantastic in that upon completion it unlocked other modes of play and new weapons and costumes to use and even contained minigames within. It gave me a reason to go back in. You could try new things and win prizes. Not to mention that the game gave you about 25 hours of terrific story and inspired gameplay.

While Stranger certainly also told a good tale and contained inspired gameplay, it opted, with a story twist, to negate the purpose of the entire first 2/3 of the game. All my energy and efforts to capture prey alive and amass funds and powerups were for naught. It was almost as if I, the player, had been punished for playing to the best of my ability. And I had to ask myself, does that detract from it being a triple A title? I am in the opinion that indeed it does. I am in the mindset that replayablity of single-player titles should be key in a development team's mind when crafting a game. I want to be rewarded for meeting goals in a game and I look forward to the shiny prize at the end. I want bragging rights to say "Yea, I played again and unlocked that cool secret." Otherwise titles like Stranger's Wrath just end up as an enjoyable 15 hour thrill that offers you no thanks for coming along for the ride and therefore little reason to retread where you've already been.

Sirris

Sirris, we beg to differ. The way the game leads you down the traditional path only to completely throw convention by the wayside is the very esence of the twist. Taking into account the beauty to explore and soak in, strange creatures to converse with, awesome soundtrack and the amazing diversity the "live ammo" affords, OSW is a game to be treasured and replayed often. How can you call a 15-20 hour game that's wall-to-wall art limited? We should all be thankful IPs like this can still get made. In this day and age, each one is truly a gift.

"I am in the mindset that replayablity of single-player titles should be key in a development team's mind when crafting a game."

Review Ramblings

I recently received your February issue, and I just gotta say thank you. What? No, not for Castlevania (though it WAS great) but for finally fixing your reviews section. I never really understood why you put so many reviews BEFORE the actual beginning of your reviews section. A perfect example would be your September issue. Now, I can understand wanting to separate your features from the rest of the pack, but you have nine reviews before you even get to the reviews section. NINE!!! Then the actual section is only two pages with five short reviews on them. You have your little "also notice" banner across the top. Also notice? "Hey, don't miss all the reviews on the preceding 15 pages." Seriously, how does that make any sense to anyone? If you already fixed it, then why do I bother to write in now? Well, just to remind you that what you're doing now is better, and to never resort back to your wicked ways. Also, I'm going to have to agree with "Almost happy D." in that 5 stars is a better system than four.

Unsigned

Evolutionary

When I read your review of Capcom Fighting Evolution a tear almost came to my eye. Finally, someone in the magazine world gets why some of us hardcore 2D fighting fans love this game for its great balance and overall addictiveness. I play this game a lot and it really excels when you're playing against another person, that's where you start to learn how deep the gameplay really is. Right after I read your review I went out and got a subscription to Play Magazine and have not regretted it since. Thank you Play Magazine for nominating Capcom Fighting Evolution for Fighting Game of the Year even if it didn't win. Thank you Chris Hoffman once again for listing the game as your second favorite game of 2004. And don't worry, you are not as you say, a bit alone in your unbridled love of Capcom Fighting Evolution. Some of us old school and hardcore gamers get it.

Sincerely,
Anthony "Sano" Collado

Kri Creed

One of the most beautiful and artistic gaming experiences I've ever had the euphoric pleasure of playing is the Mark of Kri. Enigmatic narration by your spirit guide Kuzu telling the tale of an adventure seeking Rau set the stage for my favorite game ever. Upon completing the game and sadly watching the credits roll, players were treated with a simple yet hope-inspiring message: "look for further adventures of Rau." At that point we all expected a sequel to be in the making, but despite the game's brilliance, its sales were lackluster. So for a brief and unhealthy period of time (for me anyway), fans of the game had to face the fact that no more adventures of Rau would ever been seen or heard. Thankfully the sequel was announced last year around E3, however we have been victim to a trickle of information about the game. Since its release is rapidly approaching, I think that you guys at Play should do a nice feature about Kri's sequel, "The Rise of the Kasai" and showcase some of the beautiful art within the game. What ya say friends at Play? Pretty pleeasse?

Mark of Kri's Biggest fan (Play Magazine is pretty cool too)
Mike V.

We have some Kasai power coming.

Final Words

I'm genuinely sorry. I can only imagine how many readers write in to agree and/or disagree with your picks after reading your year-in-review. And I never thought I'd ever be that guy who writes in giving his two cents about your picks, but this time I feel there is a game in 2004 that has been overlooked...R-Type Final. I mean, not even a nomination in the shooter category? But then again, it could just be a typo. I think it was accidentally spelled "Neo Contra."

Humor aside, thank you for producing a fantastic mag. Your picks for 2004 were great; I guess I was just hoping to see one last moment of glory for the finest installment of a now-extinct series.

Cheers,
Chris Leonard


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ink

news | trends | gossip | assorted nonsense

PSP U.S. launch details finally revealed

The next generation of handhelds lands Mar. 24

With the launch of their stunning new PSP handheld just weeks away, Sony finally revealed the exact date—March 24—and price for their next-generation system. At $249, the PSP is coming in a bit pricier than many had recently speculated, but that price delivers to consumers the PSP Value Pack: the PSP hardware in addition to an AC adaptor, a 32MB memory stick, battery pack, protective case, headphones with remote control, the ever-exciting cleaning cloth, non-playable UMD sampler disc and, with the first million units, a UMD disc containing the hit Spider-Man 2 film. Unlike in Japan, where the cost for just the unit alone was approximately $185, the PSP is not being offered separate from the Value Pack at this time. Sony promises that one million PSPs will be available in North America within a week following launch, just in time to close Sony's fiscal year with a bang. Sony's announcement did not reveal pricing of software.



Updated specs

Form and function

North American Release Date: March 24, 2005
Price: $249.99
Dimensions: 6.7" (W) x 2.9" (D) x .9" (H)
Weight: .62 lbs.
CPU: PSP CPU (1-333 MHz)
Main Memory: 32 MB
Embedded DRAM: 4 MB
Display: 4.3 inch, 16:9 widescreen TFT LCD, 480 x 272 pixel, 16.77 million colors, Maximum luminance 180/130/80cd/m2 (battery pack), Maximum luminance 200/180/130/80cd/m2 (AC adaptor)
Speakers: Built-in stereo speakers
Main Input/Output: IEEE 802.11b (Wi-Fi), USB 2.0 (mini-B), Memory Stick Duo, IrDA, IR remote
Main Connectors: Memory Stick Duo slot, USB Connector, DC OUT connector, DC IN 5V connector, Headphone connector
Disc Drive: UMD (Universal Media Disc) Drive (playback only)
Power: Built-in lithium-ion battery, AC adaptor
Access Control: Region Code, Parental Control
Included Accessories: AC adaptor, Battery pack, Memory Stick Duo (32 MB), Headphone with remote control, Soft case and cloth, UMD Sampler disc, UMD Spider-Man 2 (limited)

Looking to the PSP's future

The beginning of something big

While consumers are eagerly awaiting the PSP's impending launch, Sony officials are already commenting on what kinds of features users should expect from the system down the road. Among these functions that will undoubtedly help Sony toward their apparent goal of turning the PSP into the ultimate multimedia device is a digital music download service, evidently hoping to grab a major piece of the pie that has been thus far dominated by Apple and iTunes. A PSP-specific service to download music could be available by summer, if not sooner, and direct downloadable video might not be far behind. Though slightly less exciting, another likely feature would be web browsing via the PSP for a convenient, on-the-go web hookup for the masses.

Also likely in the works: mobile phone functionality. Though visions of n-Gage might be dancing through your head, fear not—an adaptor, such as a headset, would likely be used for such purposes. In addition to all this extra functionality coming to PSP, Sony Computer Entertainment president Ken Kutaragi has stated that they will make its UMD format—the media for PSP content—open to other manufacturers, going a long way toward making the UMD the standard that Sony hopes it will become. If other manufacturers do embrace the UMD, expect them to support devices for UMD music or movies, while the games would remain specific to the PSP.

Brutal plays in the sports genre

Rockstar replaces Sega as more exclusive deals are signed

It's suddenly become a rather confusing time to be a sports video game fan. It's even more confusing to be a publisher in a market that's quickly becoming more competitive than anything we've ever witnessed in the game industry. Things are getting ugly fast. Having already secured the exclusive NFL license for the next five years, Electronic Arts then continued to further augment its sports empire in early January by snatching up the ESPN license (starting in 2006) from previous license-holder Sega as well as the rights to the Arena Football League, further ensuring that EA remains the only place for officially licensed pigskin action. What's next, the CFL? Whether a result of the loss of their key sports licenses or not, Sega then quietly bowed out of the sports arena, selling off their high-profile sports developers, Visual Concepts and Kush games, to none other than Take 2 Interactive, which will continue to market sports games under the "2K" banner that Sega pioneered. The deal was apparently a corollary option that arose out of the joint publishing venture between Sega and Take 2 for last year's crop of ESPN sports games. Surprisingly, Visual Concept was acquired for the fairly low sum of $24 million—shocking when compared to the $375 million that Microsoft paid for Rare not so long ago. Essentially simultaneously with their new developer acquisitions, Take 2 also struck back at EA's tactics by announcing that they had secured the exclusive third-party rights to Major League Baseball and the MLBPA—meaning that, starting in 2006 and continuing for the next seven years, they will be the only publisher outside of Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft with the ability to make MLB titles (and once again limiting gamers' freedom of choice). This raises the question as to whether EA might partner with a company like Microsoft to create a first-party MLB game, but at this point, such an idea is pure speculation (and goes against EA's multiplatform philosophy). As of press time, rumors are flying that the NBA could be next to sign exclusive gaming contracts. What a war EA has started…

RE Outbreak Play event



Here are the details regarding our RE Outbreak File #2 online event! When you log online, you'll be able to view any special events happening, and the "Play Event" will show up in the options.

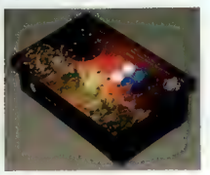
Room title: Play Event
No. of players: 3 players
Waiting time: 30 minutes
Difficulty: Hard
Friendly Fire: Off
Virus Level: 0%
Nightmare Mode: Off
Inifinity Mode (Ammo): On
SP Item Hint: On
Result Point Multiplier: x3
Life Max: 100%
Time Limit: 3 hours
Prize Item: Alyssa C Costume (MIDNIGHT CALLER)
Scenario: Flashback
Characters: Females only
Max tries: 10
Dates/Times: May 17, 12:00 pm through May 20, 12:00pm

More fighting in the aisles

Street Fighter Xbox pads on the way

NubyTech's Street Fighter controllers hit big when they landed on PS2 last year shortly after Capcom released Street Fighter Anniversary Collection. Now the company is looking to follow the combo through with even more licensed Street Fighter peripherals. With the impending release of the Xbox version of Anniversary Collection, three new styles of six-button fighting pads are on the way—this time featuring Akuma, Guile and Sagat—set to hit stores in February. But if pads aren't good enough to recreate the arcade experience, Nuby has also released the Official Street Fighter Anniversary Arcade Stick—a hefty arcade-style joystick with an eight-button layout, compatible with both PS2 and Xbox, adorned with beautiful UDON artwork. The Arcade Stick is available now, exclusively at EB Games, with a price of $60.



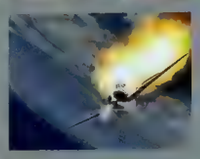


Choose your peripheral for Street Fighter domination.

Gaming down under

Throwing a few games on the barby

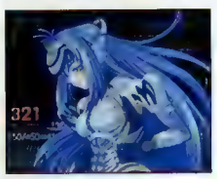




(top) The battle for best developer... (bottom) Keep an eye out for the intense Heroes of the Pacific.

There's Europe, there's America, and there's Japan. Outside these three central stations, you probably don't associate much else as key gamemakers. Australia would love nothing more than to be the latest faction to grab your enthusiast attention. In a unique and aggressive move to help put the country on the competitive map, the Australian government is increasingly supporting its growing game scene, setting up substantial programs like providing local houses developer kits for both PS2 and Xbox. One such company who took keen advantage of the program is That Game, who, after 12 months preparing their first project, Heroes of the Pacific, had the World War II air combat game picked up to be published by Encore later this year. Financial assistance is also not out of the question for these up-and-comers, who can receive invaluable grants to get projects off the ground. Recognizing the need for new, educated talent, Australia is also pushing forward universities entirely dedicated to game degrees. Development houses are increasingly interested in pulling students from these programs, with the likes of QANTM and Academy of Interactive Entertainment some of the first to foster the samples. At a [illegible] at length, and one of the main areas Australia is concerned with is an emphasis on the need for camaraderie within the local development community. Ideas are shared, and an unusual openness and company loyalty exists. At an awards ceremony closing the conference, heavy hitters like Tantalus (Trickstar for GBA, Unreal 2 for Xbox), Atari Melbourne House (Transformers) and Krome Studios (Ty Tiger, King Arthur) gathered to drive their message home with a massive Nerf-gun war.

Rumors & Bits



Namco X Capcom

Expect a major announcement from Nintendo soon regarding specific Wi-Fi plans for the DS. Metroid Prime: Hunters should be one of the first games to take advantage of these capabilities… We've seen Capcom go head-to-head with SNK; now they're joining forces with Namco to create Namco X Capcom, which is, of all things, a strategy-RPG developed by Monolith Software. Look for characters from Xenosaga, Street Fighter, Darkstalkers, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Soul Calibur, Strider, Tekken, Klonoa and more when it hits Japan this May… Release your inner criminal on the go: Rockstar is bringing Grand Theft Auto to the PSP, although details are currently sparse… Nintendo is returning to the ballpark with Nintendo Pennant Chase Baseball. Don't confuse this MLB-licensed game with the upcoming Mario Baseball… Speaking of Nintendo and sports, the fantastic SNES game Super Punch-Out!! is being included in the GameCube version of EA's Fight Night Round 2, while Mario, Luigi and Princess Peach are appearing in the GC version of NBA Street Vol. 3… Arc the Lad certainly gets around when it comes to publishers. Namco will be bringing Arc's online game, Arc the Lad: End of Darkness (aka Arc the Lad Generations in Japan), to the U.S. in May… Namco has also acquired, strangely enough, the license for Gumby. Maybe we'll get to roll him up in Katamari Damacy 2, since guest appearances are in his contract… The Incredibles sold so well for THQ that they've got Heavy Iron working on a sequel for a fall release… In other THQ news, they have a cell phone version of Destroy All Humans! in the works… Activision acquired handheld developer extraordinaire (and developer of Doom 3 for Xbox) Vicarious Visions in mid-January… Xenosaga scenario writer Soraya Saga has taken her leave of the Xenosaga series. Hopefully the departure of this key creator—one of the masterminds behind the series—won't spell problems for the game's next installment… Trip Hawkins, founder of Electronic Arts but perhaps best known for the debacle called 3DO, has been inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences Hall of Fame… Even though many of the Classic NES Series GBA games have had less-than-stellar sales, a third wave is reportedly coming to North America. Kid Icarus, perhaps?

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Mercenaries** lucasarts / ps2, xb, gc
02	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
03	**Winning Eleven 8** konami / ps2
04	**NBA Street Vol. 3** ea / ps2, xb, gc
05	**Shadow of Rome** capcom / ps2
06	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
07	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
08	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
09	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
10	**The Getaway: Black Monday** sony / ps2

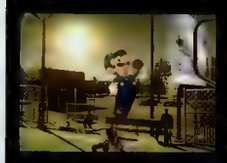


NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Dec. Game Sales

01	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
02	**Need for Speed Underground 2** ea / ps2
03	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
04	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / ps2
05	**Call of Duty: Finest Hour** activision / ps2
06	**Kingdom Hearts: COM** square enix / gba
07	**Need for Speed Underground 2** ea / xb
08	**NBA Live 2005** ea / ps2
09	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
10	**Mario Party 6** nintendo / gc



Your Megastore Beckons!



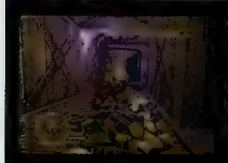
NBA Street Vol. 3
ea / ps2, xb, gc

After you get through mopping the court with the NBA's finest, you can go head-to-head with the Mario crew...on GameCube, anyway.



Winning Eleven 8
konami / ps2

How does the best soccer series get even better? New moves, more strategy, even more realism. Absolutely unrivaled.



Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath
ea / xb

Adventure game nirvana awaits all those who venture into Oddworld's latest instant classic.

Staff and reader selections

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Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**The Legend of Zelda** nintendo / gc
02	**Doom 3** activision / xb
03	**Jade Empire** microsoft / xb
04	**Devil May Cry 3** capcom / ps2
05	**Ridge Racers** namco / psp



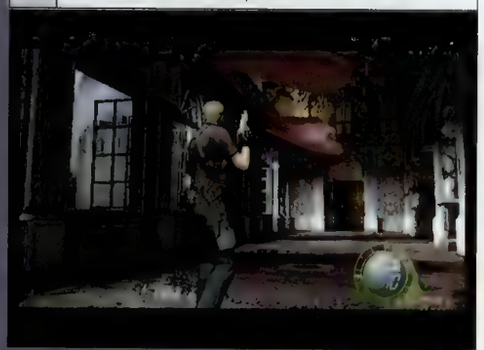
Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
02	**Ridge Racers** namco / psp
03	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC** bandai / ps2
04	**Musashi: Samurai Legend** square enix / ps2
05	**Star Fox Assault** nintendo / gc



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
02	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
03	**Project: Snowblind** eidos / xb
04	**TimeSplitters Future Perfect** ea / ps2
05	**NBA Street Vol. 3** ea / ps2



Chris Hoffman www editor

01	**Castlevania for DS** konami / ds
02	**Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap** nintendo / gba
03	**Darkstalkers Chronicle** capcom / psp
04	**WarioWare: Touched!** nintendo / ds
05	**Metal Gear Ac!d** konami / psp

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap** nintendo / gba
02	**Ridge Racers** namco / psp
03	**Lumines** bandai / psp
04	**Minna no Golf Portable** sony / psp
05	**Enthusia Professional Racing** konami / ps2

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	**Ridge Racers** namco / psp
02	**Lumines** bandai / psp
03	**Minna no Golf Portable** sony / psp
04	**Shin Sangoku Musou** koei / psp
05	**Mario Party 6** nintendo / gc

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PlayStation.2

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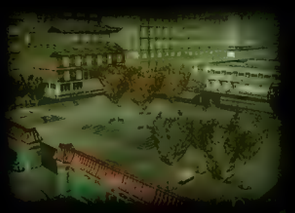
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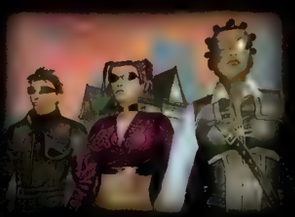
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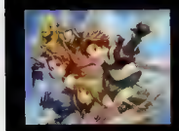
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Inside Sega of Japan
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SEGA

Long story short

One of gaming's most legendary brands gets ready for its next generation

During the heated 16-bit wars, most thought it impossible: Sega's Genesis with its inferior 64 colors on screen (out of 512) and memory-gobbling 4Mhz Z80 sound, outshine Nintendo's 256 colors on screen (of 32,768) and separate nine-channel Sony sound chip (not to mention Mode 7, transparency and scaling)? Never! But the naysayers never saw Yuji Naka's little blue hedgehog coming, and he charted a course that would lock the two in mortal combat. I doubt even Sega saw that one coming, but it would change the course of gaming forever. Soon after, Sega went for Nintendo's jugular on national TV, including a hilarious color vs. black-and-white campaign pitting its Game Gear against Nintendo's Game Boy, and the battle raged on...

Sega was a company forged on triple-A Japanese software that literally drove the industry. Whether in the arcades or on console, Sega was the first name in gaming worldwide, but all on the backs of some of the best Japanese developers in the world. Now they had money and notoriety in the burgeoning American market, so they set out to usher in the next level of gaming through licensing and new technology. First came the Sega CD and a slew of U.S. licenses (some good, most bad), answered by Nintendo's Super FX chip, and then, to stem the tide between the Sega CD and impending next-gen wars—where Nintendo and Sega would ultimately both have their hats handed to them by Sony, who got in the game after Nintendo reneged on having a Sony CD drive at the core of their 64-bit machine—came the 32X, Sega's big, fat, snap-on mistake that began life on the back of a napkin. Sega got stingy on the sound chip and the specs, and fueled by mediocre sales and mostly underwhelming games, the 32X marked the beginning of the end for Sega as we knew it. After the Saturn fell prey to Sony's PlayStation, Sega hung their hopes on being the first 128-bit machine to market, and by the sheer tenacity and spirit of new leader Peter Moore, along with a mind-blowing Sonic experience at launch, the Dreamcast seemingly marked the new beginning Sega fans had been thirsting for.

As successful as the Dreamcast debut and subsequent rise was, however, with the arcade business worldwide in decline and the residual wounds of the Sega CD/32X debacles to bear, the Dreamcast couldn't stop the bleeding, and in a shocking turn of events that would stifle millions of gamers worldwide, Sega unexpectedly pulled the plug on the Dreamcast, and with it, their hardware business altogether. Having established brands like Shenmue, NFL 2K, Jet Grind Radio, Skies of Arcadia, D2 and Space Channel 5, and re-awakening the likes of Ecco the Dolphin, Phantasy Star and Sonic—not to mention amazing third-party games like ShadowMan, Bangai-O, Maken X, Super Magnetic Neo, Fur Fighters, Sword of the Berserk, Rayman 2, Blue Stinger, Grandia 2 and Red Dog—Sega waved the white flag. Soon after, Peter Moore headed for greener pastures (literally) over at Microsoft, and Sega's been feeling around in the dark ever since.

Since the Dreamcast fell, things have been hit and miss. Sonic Adventure 2 fell short of expectations; they finally gave us another Shinobi, but apparently lost the recipe; Skies of Arcadia emerged on the GameCube too late; Naka's latest masterpiece was amazing but Americans balked for obvious reasons (like it being based on a chicken boy that rolls eggs); and Sonic Heroes was exceptional...except on the world's most popular system—the PS2 version was painful. Meanwhile, over on Xbox, Sega continued to churn out some of the best games in the world; problem was, they all hit before the Xbox hit its stride. GunValkyrie, Panzer Dragoon Orta and Jet Set Radio Future, three games that should have sold in the millions and spawned sequels since, tanked for lack of support and user base, while obscure games that followed like Otogi got lost in the quagmire of big brands. Most recently, Blood Will Tell—another great Sega game—flew by under the radar as another example of a classic Sega misfire, where they make a great game based on an unknown commodity that's like oil and water to Western audiences. Rather than choosing a known manga in the U.S. or a hit anime to cast such a great game, Blood Will Tell was based on an ancient Tezuka manga released in Japan before most gamers were born. Adding insult to injury, Sega took the one world-renowned Tezuka work, Astro Boy, and made a mediocre game for the wrong console. Astro Boy had GameCube exclusive written all over it (it's Sonic Team's strongest platform and has a strong enthusiast base), yet it was released for PlayStation—Sonic Team's known Achilles' heel and home to such brands as GTA. On the United front, I'm still scratching my head over why Samurai Jack didn't hit the mark. Great brand, great game, and timely as can be, but still, the well was dry... So taking all of the above into account, what's it going to take? A Segaphile like myself might say re-establish Smilebit, Team Andromeda and Climax, and get them working on sequels (real sequels) to Shinobi, Golden Axe and Landstalker, followed by Nights,

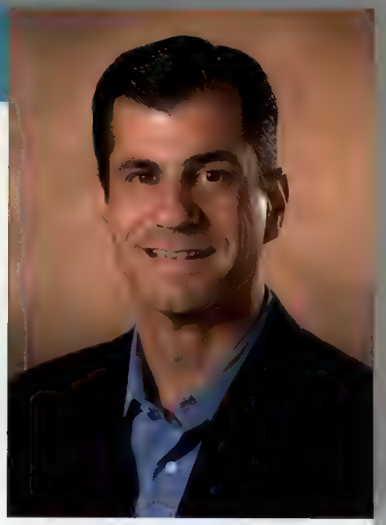
> **"Whether in the arcades or on console, Sega was the first name in gaming worldwide, but all on the backs of some of the best Japanese developers in the world."**

Streets of Rage and Jet Set Radio; keep Naka focused on the best thing Sega has going (Phantasy Star) while he works on redefining 2D gaming with a new Sonic; buy or lock up Treasure and have them develop games based on big movie or TV properties (thus obliterating the likes of anyone in the game in half the time) and launch an indie division, signing up small studios to develop new original IPs on PSP where you can create a new original game in 18 months for under $2 million a pop. Birth 'em on PSP, and then if they hit, introduce them on console. It wouldn't hurt to start locking up some anime properties either. One great Evangelion game would pay for the whole plan. Of course, all of the above, well, most of it at least, isn't going to happen, although what is seems almost as good.

The man who helped engineer SoA's meteoric rise back in the day, Tom Kalinsky, did so through a combination of East-meets-West branding, where the likes of Jurassic Park, Batman, Michael Jackson's Moonwalker and later BUG! joined with Japanese brands like Sonic the Hedgehog, Shinobi, Streets of Rage, Gunstar Heroes, Phantasy Star, Silpheed, Landstalker and Shining in the Darkness (to name but a few from each side of the fence). What's happening currently appears to be a bona fide resurgence, as the new administration sets out to replicate those glory days when their U.S./Japan assault KOed the competition...

Interview

Scott Steinberg, vice president of entertainment marketing, Sega



The interview Sega fans have been waiting for: Scott Steinberg answers most of our questions (he declined on our Dreamcast queries, as he wasn't present during its demise) and lays out Sega's master plan...

play: Even though Sega is out of the hardware game, do its halls still echo that underlying feeling of strength...of a company that lead the pack during one of the most exciting times in gaming history?
Scott Steinberg: Of course. Actually, that is the company that I remember. I missed all of the recent history—my memory of Sega is one of a company and brand that shocked the world and made history. The Sega brand still has a lot of that same juice left in it—due in good part to our history as a console developer. And much of the development talent that made us so successful in the Genesis days remains on board with us. And there are several folks who are boomerang Sega employees, such as myself and Sue Hughes, who just joined us as head of our U.S. sales team, who were at Sega of America in the glory days and want to recreate that same magic.

Do you feel that it's possible to achieve that status once again as a software developer/publisher?
That is the team's ambition—to help bring Sega back to a position of leadership in the industry. Our business mission is to once again become a top publisher. That is definitely an attainable goal because of our heritage and the brand equity it has afforded us. But it can't be done using the same strategies used in the past. The marketplace has changed a great deal over the past decade, and in order to compete today, companies need to offer U.S. gamers compelling Western content. We have a new management team and are following new strategies to achieve that mission—so I am very optimistic about Sega's future. The path to that is to ensure that the company remains relevant to western audiences.

And obviously the shift to next-generation hardware offers Sega of America the chance to wipe the slate clean on the past and execute against a repositioning plan with new product ideas.

As vice president of entertainment marketing, how much of SoA's new direction is in your hands?
There is a very tight-knit team in the U.S. and in European offices, maybe no more than a dozen people, that are helping to chart the course for the future of Sega in the Western territories. Of course, I represent the U.S. marketing side, but business development, product development and sales are all cooperating across the Atlantic to find the right combination of games, genres and technologies to bring Sega back. The team that we have at Sega is at the company to make a major impact on its resurgence. It's not every day that you find a company with the strong alchemy for a comeback. The world loves the underdog, and I think that Sega has great possibilities.

Having run the international marketing for other companies, I'm a huge proponent towards building organizations without boundaries. If the business side isn't on the same page on a global basis, then the economics of this industry become even tougher. We think about targeting and acquiring content that works for multiple territories.

One great thing coming out of Japan following BWT and Otogi 2 is Tenchu: Fatal Shadows. The Tenchu franchise in Sega's hands is very exciting, as is this installment. K2 has completed two games in the series so far. If this one hits big, are they keen on continuing onto PS3?
We can't wait to see what K2 is planning for the series on the next generation of hardware. Our relationship with From, the publisher of Tenchu: Fatal Shadows in Japan, is very strong. It has been since we distributed Otogi: Myth of Demons in the U.S.

That sounds like a definite "most likely." One would think the way back for Sega would be through its brands; however, Sega is almost notorious for doing the opposite of what its fans want. There are no signs of life from Streets of Rage, Golden Axe, NiGHTS, BUG!, Astal, Comix Zone, Clockwork Knight, Legend of Oasis and on and on. Imagining what Naka-san could do with the real Sonic gameplay devices in 2D, given today's power, makes the hair on the back on one's neck stand up as well. So why not make it so? Why Billy Hatcher and not 2D super Sonic? You had to know the masses wouldn't embrace a hyper-cute chicken boy.
This issue of classic IP is one of my favorite subjects and one of the most exciting parts of our future plans. There are some of these older brands that I know quite well—in many instances I either worked on them directly or indirectly during their original launch. There are brands in our back pocket that are just screaming to be transformed, updated and elevated to market-leader status. In this industry where it's so difficult and expensive to launch new IP, Sega is sitting on a foundation of incredible possibilities. However, with those possibilities come challenges in that we make sure when we reintroduce our IP it's at the right time, to the right audience, and the titles get the right amount of innovation. Over the next several years, you will see us make some pretty interesting announcements about reintroducing classic IP.

We're seeing a lot of 2D gameplay finding its home on mobile phones, which is an exciting growth area at Sega. And you can always get your 2D fix with some of Sega's handheld titles. We will be continuing to support the GBA in 2005; in fact, a classic 2D franchise will appear for the first time on that platform this fall.

Building on familiar franchises is important, but so is creating all-new experiences for our audience. Sega's development teams learn and grow by creating unique properties like Billy Hatcher. The team working on our primary Sonic titles (led by Yuji Naka) pride themselves on trying something totally new with each game. I think you'll be pleased by the direction Sonic is headed in the near future.

Cell phone games aren't exactly what I had in mind, but I read you. Hey, if that new game in the fall is the Gunstar Heroes sequel we've been praying for, you'll be my hero. What about Jet Set Radio? GunValkyrie is another spectacular game left at the altar. Why not have Smilebit crank up the sequel machine?
Sega of America has been spending quite a lot of time looking at its IP and evaluating the relevance of new, classic, licensed and existing IP. We make these decisions based on consumer feedback on both sides of the Atlantic. Again, it's impossible to ignore the globalization

"There are brands in our back pocket that are just screaming to be transformed, updated and elevated to market-leader status."

"With the abilities of current-gen and especially next-gen technologies, building personalities and character development will extend past the definition of 'mascot.'"

of this industry—Sega's decision-making on product launches and brand management brings research to bear on gamers from the U.S. and across Europe. Jet Set Radio Future, proud as we are of it, might have been a bit ahead of its time. Meaning…perhaps it'd be a perfect title to re-introduce sometime in the future, right? As for Smilebit…the team has been absorbed by Sega Studios in Japan. But the key team members are still a part of our Japanese development group.

…You mean ahead of the Xbox's time. Just make us another. What about Treasure?! Your one-time ace in the hole has been doing bit work since the Genesis days. Here's a Rare-quality developer that can deliver magic inside of two years on a small budget and you haven't been back to the well? Imagine the elation Gunstar Heroes 2 would bring…[beating dead horse]. Why not rekindle that relationship?
Yeah, Treasure is a fantastic team. Astro Boy: Omega Factor, the GBA title they developed for us, was one of the best-reviewed games of 2004. And like your readers, we'd love to see them take another crack at Gunstar Heroes. That would be one we'd want to distribute. Our relationship with them is very strong, and we intend to maintain that partnership.

That's great to hear. Speaking of classic Genesis games, the new classics collection features a bundle of Sega Ages games which are anything but classic. So why the retreads and not the true power?
The titles in the Sega Classics Collection are not intended to replace the original games. These are alternate versions, remixes, pulled together on a single disc as a value product for casual gamers. Every game on the disc retailed in Japan separately for nearly 20 dollars each. Sega Classics Collection is a great value—it contains a 10-game compilation of these at only 20 dollars.

Yeah, it's a good deal, but it would still be great to see the original games on there…What's the latest on Sonic?
Sonic is still our most valuable global franchise—whether it's the animated TV show or McDonald's Happy Meals, there are few properties that have that cache and value. Sega has the potential to have that value along with newer content that speaks to an older demographic—which is quite a diversified portfolio. But Sonic is still our flagship brand and will be for the foreseeable future. With the abilities of current-gen and especially next-gen technologies, building personalities and character development will extend past the definition of "mascot." Sonic still resonates very strongly with our fans and we are always looking to build new brands that are tailored to different consumer tastes.

On the U.S. side, how exactly will Sega go about entering the fray currently in progress with the likes of VU Games, Atari, Activision, Rockstar and UbiSoft all in the hunt?
It will be with the combined power of the "new" and the "classic." We are a unique company in that way with our IP. Like those companies, we will be publishing content that is relevant and exciting to U.S. gamers. We have an aggressive acquisition group that has maintained strong relationships with all of the major independent development houses. The Sega brand resonates as strongly with those developers as it does with your readers. Additionally, we have a strong backlog of classic characters to draw from for franchise-building games.

Obviously, the collaboration with Sega of Europe is huge. In the UK, Sega is an institution, much like it was here in the mid-'90s, where they enjoy fervent fandom. Having this power in America will surely help your case for global domination. What other changes is Sega undergoing internally?
Unifying Sega of America and Sega of Europe under Mr. Tsurumi creates a more efficient engine to drive the process—development, acquisitions, marketing—that will strengthen our position in the Western market. He has been in Europe for over eight years and is extremely versed in the needs of executing and succeeding in the West. The teams have been collaborating since I started nearly a year ago—so this process is well along in its evolution. We also have a new president and COO, Simon Jeffery, who brings tremendous experience to the table. He was formerly at LucasArts, Virgin Interactive and EA.

In terms of marketing, do you think that publishers in general would be better served controlling their game coverage and ad placement, keeping platformers and the like away from the "men's" magazines and sticking with TV ads and the press outlets where they (you) can trust the game will be properly depicted? We can never figure out why publishers in general send their creations into the lion's den: outlets that review games based on early preview builds or simply a press release, that much of the time write for little more than laughs. It seems like a lot of companies spend money on "eyeballs," but if they're the wrong ones, why shoot yourself in the foot and pay for the privilege?
Mainstream and enthusiast press are both very important. Naturally, serious gamers are reading publications like Play, and it's critical to capture their attention because they are the trend-setters. Casual gamers look to them for advice on what to buy. Casual gamers, by contrast, do not regularly read gaming magazines; they read mainstream publications. And generally, gaming coverage in those books is very favorable. So getting coverage there becomes primarily about getting the product's name and some visuals out there. If a hardcore gamer is evangelizing something like Otogi 2 to a casual friend, it helps if the friend has heard of the game. This isn't different than any other entertainment business (books, movies, music). Having spent some time in the music business, I know the similarities first hand. The reality is that whether it's to break a band or launch a game, you need to have a strong promotional foundation to the core audience and build on that with more mainstream publications.

Forever the diplomat. Companies like Ubisoft have begun handing over big acquisitions to its most elite in-house developer, like Peter Jackson sailing over to their Montreal Studios for King Kong, which in your case is Smilebit and Sonic Team. In terms of your U.S./UK acquisitions, will you be farming them out, acquiring studios, building one, or fishing for developers like Climax who crank out a port a week?
Of course, we will continue to capitalize on the strengths of our internal teams when developing new games. Simultaneously, we will be hunting for fresh content created by independent studios. And we will be contracting external development houses to build on some of our classic intellectual properties.

Blood Will Tell—one of the year's best adventures—flew under the radar due to mixed, and for the most part inaccurate, reviews. It seems that to get a hit in the U.S., you need a big name, at least an average game, and lots of marketing dollars spent in the right place. If that's the case, then is sensationalism what defines success in the American game market? And if so, doesn't that dramatically change the structure and foundation gaming was built upon? How much does big retail control what you do?
More than anything, we must ensure that our U.S. product is in tune with the tastes of Western audiences. That doesn't mean abandoning the classic Japanese properties; it simply means being more selective about what comes out here from overseas, and making smart acquisitions from western developers. You may have forgotten that during the Genesis days, when I was originally at Sega of America, the company used both Western content from U.S. developers as well as Japanese content—this is the same recipe for success that we are trying to create today. In the industry's current evolution, retail is critical. We don't have a post-theatrical business model like the movie industry where DVD or PPV revenues can offset a less-than-stellar launch. Therefore, we need to think big and support titles that we think have "presidential" potential—but this isn't any different than the way this and the toy industry have always operated.

Tezuka's Blood Will Tell is great example. Here's a great game, but his works aren't fresh on fan's minds. With stacks of name brands with followings at your disposal—likely all cost effective—mainstream manga seems the way to go if you're not going to hawk your classic brands…
Anime and manga are great places to look for strong properties. I do think that Astro Boy and Blood Will Tell were a significant step in that direction, and we will continue to evaluate the relevance of anime properties in this territory.

Hope for the future. When the Sega collective assemble, what's the conversation like? Is world domination at hand?
We talk about our five-year plan for turning the company's fortunes around. It's amazing that with all the technology advances over the last few years, much of what we still talk about are the people and ideas "behind the curtain." People with creative vision—ideas that stoke the imagination and have potential to redefine genres. There is a lot of strategic planning that goes on, and we quickly go from 100,000 feet to the molecular level when talking about product, because those details are where success or failure usually resides. It's an obvious statement, but success requires product, and that process isn't built with a magic wand—it takes patience and drive.

In conclusion, let's play a game: I'll fire off the game and you give me the percent chance in hell it will ever see a sequel…Legend of Oasis… Streets of Rage…Gunstar Heroes… LandStalker…Alex Kidd…NiGHTS… BUG…2D Sonic…Comix Zone…Jet Set Radio…GunValkyrie…Clockwork Knight…Sword of Vermillion…
Let's turn this one to your audience… put this survey on a web site and let's find out which of these games your readers want to see return the most?

Play Magazine Online is launching soon…we'll do that!

Tenchu

Fatal Shadows

By Writhing Snake and Twisting Fangs, crimson drains



Art: Jeff Matsuda
Ink: Dave McCaig

The first word in ninja stealth has a new pedigree, if not a new lease on life. Now flying the Sega flag, the latest Tenchu, Fatal Shadows, bids farewell to Rikimaru—who certainly deserves a vacation—and introduces Ayame as the key figure, trading missions with newcomer Rin, a Beniya assassin out for revenge after her village is burnt to the ground and family decimated. While hers and Ayame's first encounter is one of unfortunate circumstance, within the context of Fatal Shadows' twisting road of betrayal and deceit, they must unite to overcome the clan devoted to wiping the Beniya off the face of the Earth completely, Rin included. Loosely translated, for the Tenchu player, this means that rather than guiding either Rikimaru or Ayame over roughly the same terrain, in Fatal Shadows, each mission represents an episode along the same path: separate factions pursuing the same evildoers for different reasons. Not only does this make for a more compelling overall adventure as their paths intertwine, but it gives us two distinct ninja flavors to savor, and as anyone that plays Tenchu knows, ninja mastery is truly the essence of the game.

Each area along the way offers a variety of ways for Rin or Ayame to reach their key goals, either by stealth or confrontation—simple enough if reaching the level's end was the sole objective. In Tenchu, how you play has a dramatic effect on how you will need to continue to play, as the only way to true enlightenment is through stealth. If you play like a thug, special moves and items that change the face of the game will be slow in coming, but play like a slinky Manx and you will be gifted with items and moves that reward your cunning with incessantly more gratifying gameplay. As a rule, early on, before

things heat up, if you rate "Thug," take the time to re-do the level. It only takes a couple of perfect "Assassin" rankings to arm Rin and Ayame to the teeth. There are also different levels of stealth kills, which render a different number of the scrolls needed to attain new moves. A simple sneak attack may only endow one or two, while a special kill may award up to five. The nuances of Tenchu are forever what drive me to play over and over, and K2 has once again programmed the game with an emphasis on longevity.

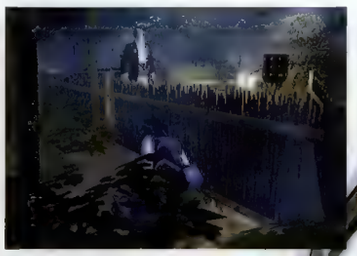
Unlike Wrath of Heaven, the confrontations in Fatal Shadows are all of the human nature as the story sticks to human drama, and so this game has a more serious dramatic tone—one of many aspects that sets Fatal Shadows apart from its predecessors. Most notably, while K2 still hasn't taken to meshing their characters' nimble prances with the undulations of the terrain, they have dramatically improved the series' lackluster water effects, going as far as making it a useable element in the game. Although underutilized on the whole, the new underwater gameplay device certainly opens things up for future sequels, as water stealth is definitely one of the game's coolest new features.

Additionally, even more so than Tenchu fans are accustomed to, K2 has once again placed a huge emphasis on special effects. Fog, real-time lighting, flora, reflection maps, animated textures, shadows and in-game facial expressions are striking throughout and add immeasurably to the passionate aura of ninja lore that makes this series so intriguing. Many levels of the game echo the same, with a level of color usage and geological beauty seldom seen. Together with the nimble animation of Rin and Ayame and one of the best series-endemic soundtracks in all of gaming—in which the same type of music is continually and religiously merged into the fabric of the game—Fatal Shadows is that rare sequel that endeavors to further the series' allure rather than cash in on it.

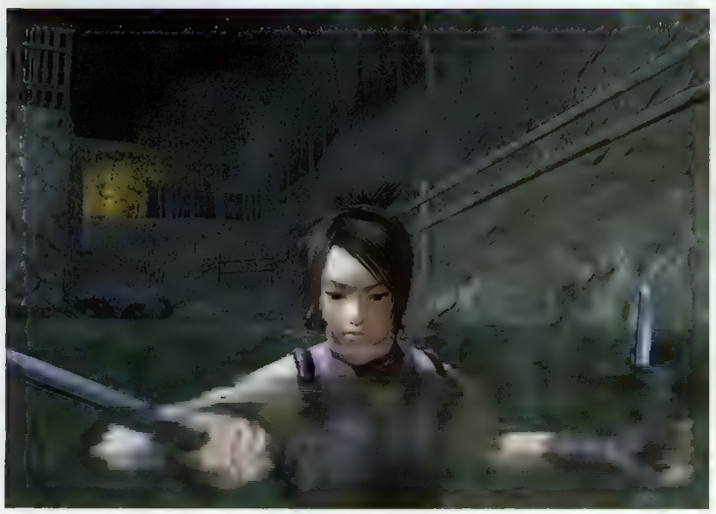
Not to say that the game is without flaw. Certain inherent miscues have seeped into the latest installment: Playing on easy, for instance, you can place a poison rice ball directly in a foe's path, stand in plain sight taunting him, and rather than crossing the threshold and chowing down, he'll walk in place and repeat the same taunt. In practical use, you'd simply disembowel his lowly ass

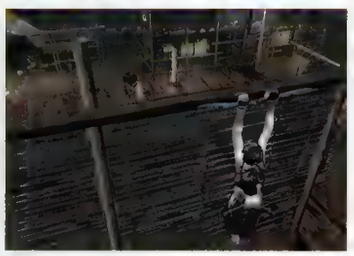
"...play like a slinky Manx and you will be gifted with items and moves that reward your cunning with incessantly more gratifying gameplay."











Water, once the series' Achilles' heel, now plays a vital role in select





Rin goes in for the kill.



"...Fatal Shadows is that rare sequel that endeavors to further the series' allure rather than cash in on it."



and move on, but if you're inclined to mess with such things, the AI in the game can be made to do some pretty freaky stuff. Also, and pretty much the only actual flaws in the game, the camera doesn't always allow you the desired vantage point even in free look (repositioning can get around this, but you risk being seen), and, like Metal Gear, at times when you'd like to stay crouched and looking straight ahead, if you're near a vertical space, Rin or Ayame will, by default, wall-hug, thus changing the perspective and blowing your cover if crouching is keeping you hidden. Again, this can usually be overcome by some quick thinking, but it is definitely something to address should Tenchu makes its way onto PS3. I'd like to see a lock-on for melee fighting and a complete rethinking of boss battles—fighting ordinary human foes fits the story but lacks wow factor—but given the gist of the Tenchu namesake, Fatal Shadows is certainly yet another lovely installment in what's been a seriously rewarding and stalwart series. Even more so than in previous games, once beaten, Fatal Shadows begs for more with temptations like new paths over traversed levels, as well as new levels altogether, attaining new moves and items that make the levels themselves come alive anew, and the always-popular new costumes, which, in this case, given the beauty on screen, is a treat indeed. At Activision, Tenchu was a grain of sand on mega-brand beach, but under the Sega banner, where they can really use an elegant, marketable female lead like Ayame, the sky is truly the limit. Speaking of which, anyone seen Kelly O' Lemney or Gum lately? Dave Halverson

Tenchu: Fatal Shadows

7.5

PlayStation 2

Score

Elegant characters wonderfully animated, compelling level design, outstanding soundtrack

Mild camera and stealth snafus, limited enemy taunts, moments of clumsy enemy AI.

Developer: K2 **Publisher:** Sega
Online: None **Available:** March

Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst

Thought it wasn't coming? Guess again.

There's something reassuring about the continuation of Phantasy Star Online. Some may argue that the game, with firm roots still in the Dreamcast original, has grown tired and pales in comparison with bigger, more complex efforts like Final Fantasy XI and World of Warcraft. I would offer, however, that its constancy is a reminder of Sonic Team doing a good job the first time around. Would I kill for Phantasy Star Universe? You better believe it, but I can always play Phantasy Star Online, so simple and lasting is its appeal.

Getting its first major update since the GameCube release of Episode 1 & 2, which introduced two new character types along with a set of original levels, the PC-only Blue Burst features a number of enhancements to the classic experience. The first of these is a private chat system, whereby you can create something like a guild and have your own chat channel with fellow guild members. And thanks to the added capabilities afforded by the PC keyboard, you can now map actions to the function keys, giving a simple but welcome enhancement to the user interface.

Sonic Team has also fiddled around with the way in which you progress through the game, requiring players to complete quests to unlock new levels. Also, your character data is now stored on the PSO servers, meaning there should be no more instances of players losing precious high-level characters, which had the nasty habit of happening on the console versions.

The biggest change, however, is the addition of a whole new episode in the U.S. release of Blue Burst. Just released in Japan, the so-called Episode 4 will feature new levels and enemies and will further expand the series' story line. Expect graphics even better than the awesome Episode 2 levels. Also expect nearly identical gameplay, but for PSO buffs, new levels are enough. Michael Hobbs

Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst

PC

Point of interest

Blue Burst is a totally online game. Even solo play requires logging in.

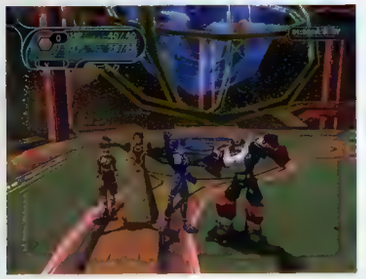
Developer: Sonic Team **Publisher:** Sega
Online: Multiplayer **Available:** TBA

"...Episode 4 will feature new levels and enemies and will further expand the series' story line."









A look at some of the new levels to be seen in PSO: Blue Burst. Notice the function keys along the bottom of the screen.

Shining Force Neo

A new day has dawned for the legendary Shining Force

The Shining games are known for being revolutionary. When the original Shining title, Shining in the Darkness, hit the Genesis back in 1991, it exploded upon the 16-bit scene with first-person dungeon crawling the likes of which had rarely been seen. When Shining Force arrived a few years later, it defined the strategy genre by melding it perfectly with RPG elements, continuing its legacy with sequels and spin-offs on the Genesis, Game Gear, Sega CD, Saturn and Game Boy Advance. Now Shining Force itself is undergoing a revolution, as one of the most revered names in tactical RPGs is reinventing itself as an action-RPG in Shining Force Neo.

Not everything players love about Shining Force is being stripped away. Neo will still have the beautiful world aesthetic that fans have come to know and love, with wonderful worlds filled with birdmen, centaurs, robots, beastmen, dragons, mages and warriors. Players will still fight as part of a team, as main character Max will usually be joined by two companions of the player's choosing when he heads into battle (and sometimes other characters will join in as well). And even though real-time combat and spellcasting will make up most of the action, elements of strategy will remain, as players will be able to customize their characters' Force Frames—the unique tools that grant the heroes their powers—by inscribing them with various Force Arts and powering them up with Energy Points obtained from enemies, thus granting access to new abilities. Additionally, Max can choose from four types of weapons, each with distinct strengths and weaknesses: the single-handed sword (swordsman type) with balanced offense and defense; the two-handed sword (warrior type), which is extremely powerful but slow and with low defense; the bow and arrow (archer type), where the benefit of ranged attacks is offset by their relative weakness; and the staff (magic-user type), which offers powerful spells but minimal physical power.

Whatever weapons and abilities you choose to arm yourself with, the main goal is the same: to enter the battlefields/dungeons and destroy the Monster Gates—dimensional portals from which creatures of evil pour through—that are plaguing the land. Not only are these Max's primary targets, but, like in the classic Gauntlet games, these Monster Gates must be destroyed to stem the flow of enemies, lest you be overwhelmed. Between battles, Max and company will visit towns, allowing the party to buy new equipment, upgrade their Force Frames, forge their weapons or just hang out in the traditional Shining Force headquarters. Towns are also good for conversing with NPCs and meeting up with new party members, of which there will be 11 besides Max himself: Meryl, Max's childhood friend and a powerful spellcaster; Klein, a birdman archer from the land of Eleanora; Baron, the wolfman warrior/scholar; Freya, a birdwoman who uses fire magic and a whip; Rhinos, a Titan with massive physical power and ice magic; Chiquitita, a healer from the half-canine Kyantol race; Graham, a centaur knight; Mariel, Graham's magic-wielding daughter; Doryu, a baby dragon; Gaia, Max's father; and Adam, a robot Guardian who protects a sacred land.

With a classic sense of style mixed with a new type of gameplay, Shining Force Neo will definitely provide something different for fans of the series, and with any luck, will bring in a new generation of fans. Will it be revolutionary? If history has anything to say about it, there's a good chance. Chris Hoffman

Shining Force Neo

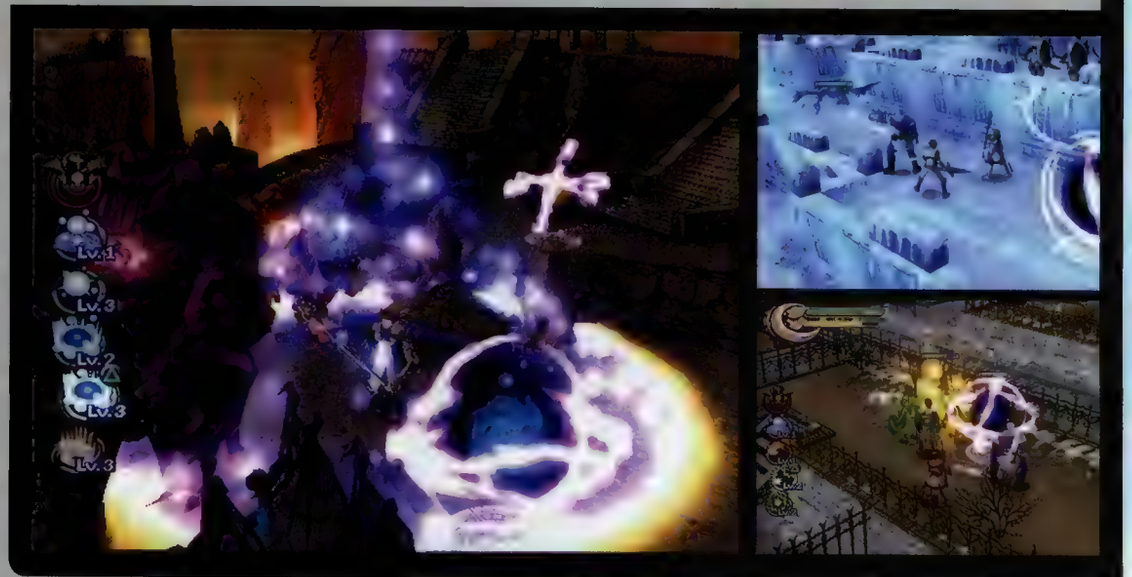
PlayStation 2

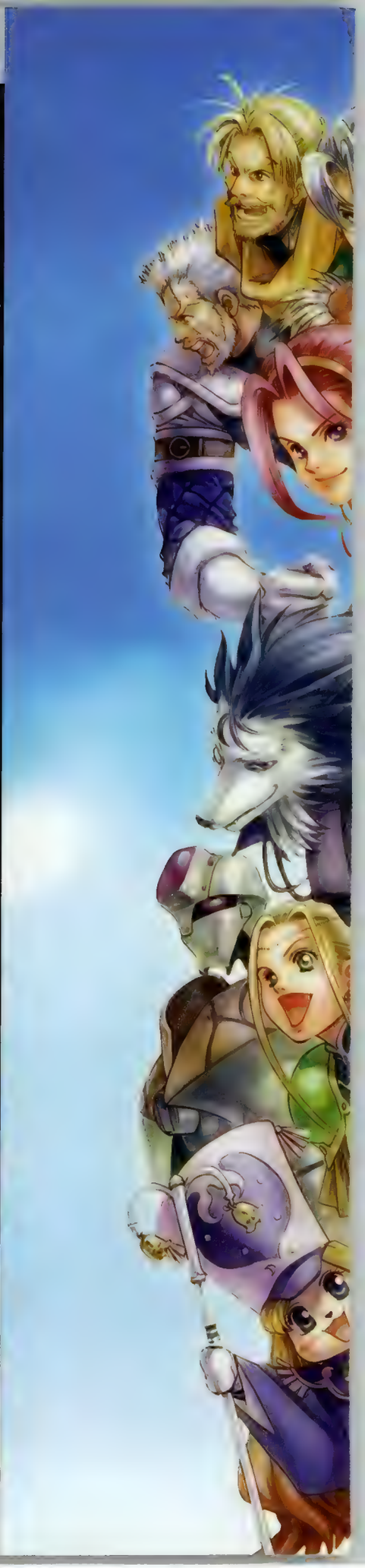
Point of Interest

As long-time series fans know, the main character in the original Shining Force was also named Max.

Developer: Sega **Publisher:** Sega
Available: August

"...even though real-time combat and spellcasting will make up most of the action, elements of strategy will remain..."





Fighting in Style

One of Shining Force Neo's standout features will be its choice of fighting styles for the hero, Max. The upper pic demonstrates the two-handed sword; this is the most powerful fighting style, but with two hands on the blade, it doesn't permit Max to use a shield. As you can imagine, wielding such a massive sword is also rather slow.

The lower pic shows off the magic-user fighting style. In order to use magic, Max must be armed with a staff. Though physically weak, the payoff in destructive magic force can be very worthwhile.

Not illustrated are the swordsman and archer fighting styles.





Bad Moon Rising

According to Neo's backstory, 18 years ago, forces of evil opened up a dimensional gate, summoning forth living weapons called the Legion from the blood-red moon hanging in the sky. At that time, heroes known as the Force Knights fought against this evil, sealing the gate and returning peace to the world. But the sinister moon, watching like an all-seeing eye, continued to hang in the sky, and it seems to have a connection to the appearance of the Monster Gates. One of the members of the Force Knights was Gaia, Max's father. Max has inherited his father's Force Frame, which is why it falls to him to cleanse the land of evil.



Shining Tears

Some gamers may weep with nostalgic joy

Shining Tears starts out on a wonderful high note—an awesome anime intro that speaks to all of the game's strengths. Traditional fantasy characters with that unmistakable Japanese style—lovely elf maidens, noble dragons, enchanting sorceresses, heroic bards, cunning wolf-men, cute cat-girls, mighty centaurs—clash on the battlefield, sometimes against each other, more often engaging in all-out combat, tearing through enemy legions with magical might and sheer brute force. The innocence and charm is breathtaking, the character design second to none, filling me with a warm familiarity that rekindles memories of the days of 16-bit.

From there, I continued to bask in the game's old-school glow as I was treated to the Shining trademarks: the conventional storyteller introducing the tale, the traditional icon-based menus (complete with happy and sad faces indicating yes and no), the familiar story of a mysterious, amnesiac young man whose combative abilities make him destined to fight for the safety of his adopted kingdom; in this case, the hero is named Xion, his special power is the use of the Twin Dragon Rings, his new home is the fortress nation of Shildia, and the impending threat is the invasion by the Holy Kingdom of Runevale. The accompanying hand-drawn 2D visuals are no less heartwarming, boasting a watercolor aesthetic in which you can feel the care used in placing every pixel of every sprite and every background. Some subtle shadow and light effects are the only visual indication that this game is on current hardware, but Shining Tears is nonetheless a celebration of splendid artistry.

"...you can feel the care used in placing every pixel of every sprite and every background."

When it comes to the gameplay itself, however, Shining Tears is a mixed bag. On one hand, the action portion of this hack 'n' slash action-RPG is astoundingly robust. Loads of special skills, a vast arsenal of armor and accessories, customizable weapons and upgradable abilities only begin to hint at the depth here, plus the game has a unique hook: every battle has Xion accompanied by a partner character, controlled by the CPU or a second player, providing convenient assistance against the massive enemy hordes—the number of onscreen enemies is insane—and permitting the use of Link Skills, which theoretically allow the player to surround the enemy and then take them out with a joint magic attack. With six partner characters (and eventually more), all with distinctive skills, that's a whole lot of combat options available.

On the other hand, there's not a whole lot of variety here outside of combat tactics. There are no puzzles and very little exploration, and level design is fairly non-existent until very late into the game; each battlefield is pretty much just built for wading into the fray and unleashing carnage in the game's classical way. Halfway through, these encounters get fairly tough too, so you'll probably have to spend significant time revisiting past battles to beef up your stats, making the game more tedious than it should be.

Also problematic is the partner AI. Although you can guide their movements with the right stick and initiate team attacks, you can't tell them to use skills or offer battle tactics, meaning that when Ryuna, the priestess, should be standing back and concentrating on healing, she might instead just walk into an enemy squadron and get herself killed. Or Elwyn, the elf huntress, might get trigger-happy (bow-happy?) while you're in the midst of getting into place for a sneak attack, thus bringing all unholy hell down on poor Xion. Some manner of control would have been nice. And what's with the severe loading times?

By the time I was done with Shining Tears, there were parts of the game I still adored. I loved the characters, the artistry, the vast combat options and the pattern-based boss fights. At the same time, I felt that the game was just too limited, suffering from artificial length, AI problems and a story that's a tad too predictable. That warm old-school glow only goes so far—far enough to make the game worth playing, but not necessarily a keeper.
Chris Hoffman

Shining Tears

6.5
Score

PlayStation 2

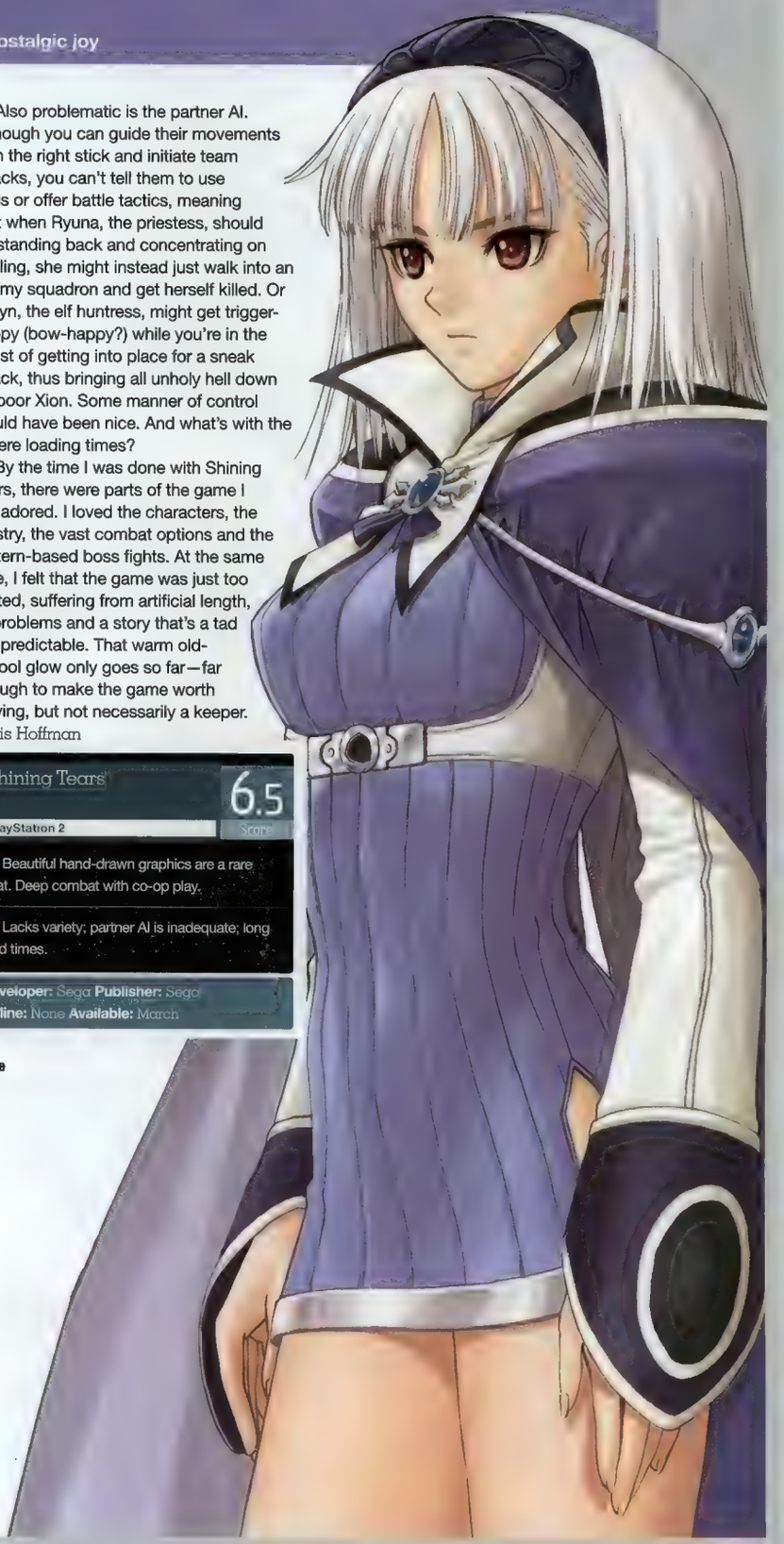
Beautiful hand-drawn graphics are a rare treat. Deep combat with co-op play.

Lacks variety; partner AI is inadequate; long load times.

Developer: Sega **Publisher:** Sega
Online: None **Available:** March



Blanc Neige's ice spells will stop enemies cold.



Interview

Tsuyoshi Sawada, producer of Shining Tears

play: What does the game's title, Shining Tears, mean?
Tsuyoshi Sawada: "Shining Tears" means "beautiful." Also—you shed tears when you are filled with delight or anger, not just when you are sad. So in that sense, the name also captures the game's feel and tone.

What was the main goal you were trying to accomplish with the creation of this game?
It was to newly create an action-RPG with a new play mechanic, where one player controls two characters simultaneously.

I love the hand-drawn 2D visuals. It's a lost art. Why did you use 2D graphics for the game, and what are your thoughts on the continued use of 2D graphics in games in general?
We selected 2D graphics out of our strong love for that visual form. Nowadays, we are getting tired of all these realistic 3D expressions. We wanted to truly differentiate this title. So, we intentionally chose this direction to master 2D graphics. Also, in terms of the game system, it was required for two characters to always be in view, so 2D pictures were more suitable than 3D ones.

The use of two characters at all times is very unique. Why was the decision made to have a second character accompanying the player character at all times even in single-player mode?
There have been few games that fully utilized the right analog stick. We wanted to develop gameplay that would actively take advantage of that part of the controller. There are a number of games in which CPU-controlled characters follow the player character, but most of these sidekicks do not handle the way the player wants them to. We wanted to fix that, and we thought that a battle system where you would link two characters to skillfully make them cooperate with each other would be fun.

How did the team's experience from working on previous games like Shining Soul help you with the creation of Shining Tears? Are there any other Shining games the team members have worked on?
Multiplayer gameplay was featured in Shining Souls, too. So that gave us somewhere to build from. We have been involved in all of the Shining projects that Sega has produced since the company became platform-agnostic.

What about this game do you think fans of the past Shining titles will especially love?
The game offers a high degree of freedom. Which character should you take as your partner? How should you level your characters up? Which equipment should you use? It is necessary to play the title strategically, and we think RPG fans will love that. This is not a run of the mill hack 'n' slash.

In the game, you encounter the Shining Force. What is their connection to the Shining Force from other games?
These Shining Forces will take active roles in different stories. In the future, expect to see them pop up in a novel, an anime movie, a title for a mobile platform, etc.

Given the developer's pedigree, did you ever consider making the game more like Crusader of Centy (one of our classic favorites), with more adventure elements like puzzles, tools and exploration?
This time, the title features a battle-oriented war story, but the next one will contain stuff like puzzle-solving and adventures.

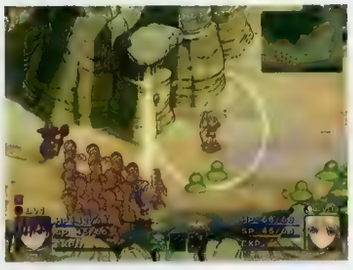
What kind of rewards or secrets will diligent players be able to unlock if they really spend time with this game?
If you clear "Tower of Ether," which is the challenge stage and the advanced mode that becomes available when you complete the first circuit of the game, you are given a reward in the form of a rare item.

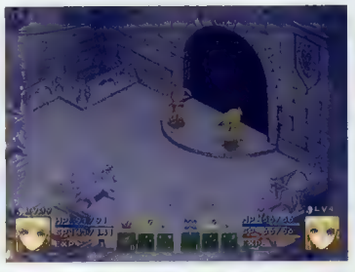
"Nowadays, we are getting tired of all these realistic 3D expressions. We wanted to truly differentiate this title."

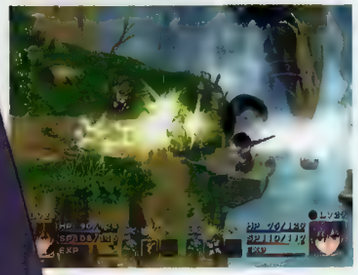
-Tsuyoshi Sawada, producer of Shining Tears

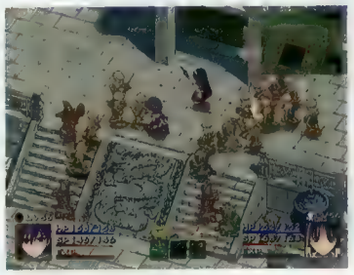


Link Skills let players surround enemies and unleash powerful attacks.











Sega Japan

New and hopefully improved

For all of our fellow Segaphiles out there waiting for the next great era in Japanese Sega game development, here's precisely how the current Sega Japan studio system breaks down, including all key departments and personnel and a compendium of Sega's best and where they fit into the current equation, if at all. Most notably, notice that Takayuki Kawagoe, famous for Panzer Dragoon, is currently working on baseball, while Panzer Dragoon Orta and Gunvalkyrie producer Takayuki Kawagoe and Orta chief director Akihiko Mukaiyama are also working on the development of sports games. This doesn't bode well. In contrast, several of Sega's best, past and present, are currently working on classified/secret console titles, so we have much to look forward too. If nothing else, this latest restructuring will certainly be interesting to monitor over the next few years. Whether or not Sega finally successfully transitions from a hardware giant to software giant relies to some extent on how well this new structure performs in league with the SoA agenda of attaining key licensed properties and developing new IPs for the West.



Magic Makers

Developer Photo (all Sega studio leads):
Back row (from left): Kazunari Tsukamoto, Takayuki Kawagoe, Hiroshi Kataoka, Yu Suzuki, Sega president Hisao Oguchi, Yuji Naka, Makoto Uchida, Toshihiro Nagoshi, Mie Kumagai. Front row (from left): Takashi Iizuka, Akinori Nishiyama, Kenji Arai, Akira Nishino, Hiroshi Uemura, Atsushi Seimiya.

New creative structure

Here's how things currently break down in Sega's new Japan studio structure, along with the individuals who lead each of the teams—GE being Global Entertainment; NE, New Entertainment; and AM, Amusement. AM software R&D 1-3 will develop games mainly for amusement machines; GE software R&D will develop games mainly for consoles; and NE will develop games both for arcade and the consoles. One of the new things introduced this time are category-specified R&D studios, such as for sports and driving.

Sega R&D/ Studio Structure (all Sega R&D studios led by Hisao Oguchi & Yukio Sugino):

Amusement Software R&D **(led by Hiroshi Kataoka)**
Dept. #1 Atsushi Seimiya: famous for Shinobi; currently working on new arcade titles and technology
Dept. #2 — Hiroshi Kataoka: famous for Fighters Megamix; currently working on new arcade titles and technology
Dept. #3 — Mie Kumagai: famous for Virtua Tennis; currently working on new arcade titles and technology
Racing Games R&D Dept. — Kenji Arai: famous for Initial D; currently working on Sega Rally PS2
Sports Design R&D Dept. — Takayuki Kawagoe: famous for Panzer Dragoon; currently working on baseball for Japan
Family Entertainment R&D Dept. — Hiroshi Uemura: famous for Mushi King; currently working on kids arcade titles and technology
New Entertainment R&D **(New Entertainment R&D led by individual dept. lead)**
Dept. #1 — Toshihiro Nagoshi: famous for Daytona USA; currently working on Spikeout: Battlestreet
Dept. #2 — Yu Suzuki: famous for Shenmue, Virtua Fighter; currently working on Shenmue Online for Japan/Asia
Global Entertainment Software R&D **(all Global Entertainment R&D led by Yuji Naka)**
Dept. #1 — Akinori Nishiyama: famous for Sonic Advance; currently working on secret/classified project
Dept. #2 — Akira Nishino: famous for Sakura Wars; currently working on Sakura 5
Dept. #3 — Yuji Naka: famous for Sonic the Hedgehog, Phantasy Star; currently working on Phantasy Star Universe
Mobile Content R&D Dept. — Kazunari Tsukamoto: famous for Blood Will Tell; currently working on new mobile titles and technology
Sega Studio USA R&D — Takashi Iizuka: famous for NiGHTS and Sonic series (Sonic Heroes); currently working on secret/classified project
Sega Studio China R&D — Makoto Uchida: famous for Altered Beast; currently working on secret/classified project



Sonic presides over the lobby as a reminder of what world domination looks like.



Where are they now?

Jet Set Radio Future/Gunvalkyrie project leader Masayoshi Kikuchi and senior programmer Kazuhisa Hasuoka...Working on development at NE R&D #1.

Yu Suzuki...Working on supervising Shenmue Online for Asian market at NE R&D #2.

Shinobi PS2 Producer Takashi Uriu... He has left Sega. No new information available

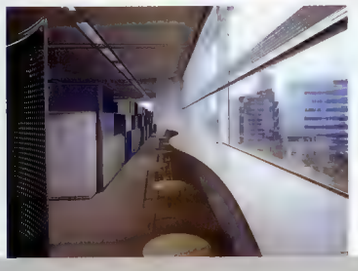
Panzer Dragoon Orta and Gunvalkyrie producer Takayuki Kawagoe and Orta chief director Akihiko Mukaiyama... Kawagoe is now head of the Sports Design R&D. Mukaiyama is working on the development of sports games.

NiGHTS game designer Takashi Iizuka ...Iizuka is now head of the Sega Studio USA.

Tetsuya Mizuguchi, from Rez... Has left Sega and since created an independent development studio and produced Lumines for PSP.







Sega USA

Sega of America and Sega Europe Ltd., wholly-owned subsidiaries of Sega Corporation in Tokyo, have now integrated their management teams to collectively drive growth in the Western markets, appointing Sega Europe CEO Naoya Tsurumi to CEO of Sega of America, Simon Jeffery to president/COO of Sega of America, Mike Hayes to COO of Sega Europe, and Sue Hughes to vice president, sales of Sega of America.

As CEO of Sega of America and Sega Europe, Mr. Tsurumi will manage Sega's software gaming businesses in North America and Europe, with an emphasis on improved efficiencies of Sega's independent subsidiaries. Sega's strategy is to gain market share in the West by jointly developing and acquiring content in North America and Europe via management collaborating more aggressively on product development and acquisitions across these, the U.S. and UK, for the next generation of platforms. In other words ,look for Sega to focus on acquiring major U.S. brands to offset the hardcore-oriented deluge from overseas.

Taking over for Hideaki Irie—the driving force behind Sega of America's software push since Peter Moore's departure after what most deem the premature ousting of the much-loved Dreamcast—as president and COO for Sega of America, Simon Jeffery, former president of LucasArts Entertainment Company, vice president of marketing for Virgin Interactive Entertainment and various roles at EA, will head up Sega's software biz in North America, including supervision of all product and business development, marketing, sales, operations and content. This is the key position at Sega and historically the one that turns the tides or sinks the ship. Given his experience in the gaming space, it's safe to assume that Mr. Jeffery has a vast knowledge of the U.S. and UK development community, which bodes extremely well for future SoA endeavors. Elsewhere, Mike Hayes, formerly managing director for Europe, will replace Mr. Tsurumi as president and COO of Sega Europe, while the highly regarded Sue Hughes rejoins the Sega team after holding executive sales positions at such esteemed companies as Cokem International, Mattel Media, and NEC Technologies. Regarding the purported Sammy/Sega merger, there was nothing new to report as of press time. **play**



God of War

"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad." *–Euripides (480-406 BC)*







The special effects hit strong and often.

"God of War will offer several conclusions to an intriguing setup, but to get there, you've got some massive bloodletting to attend to."

As God of War opens, our brutal hero is seen leaping to his death from what we are told is the highest mountaintop in Greece. Kratos has lived many years of suffering, possessed by Ares, the God of War, whom he has vowed to slaughter, no matter what the price.

Rewind three weeks, and the game begins—a search for Pandora's Box, the one object Kratos needs to end his vicious imprisonment. Will the story eventually lead to Kratos' purified survival? God of War will offer several conclusions to an intriguing setup, but to get there, you've got some massive bloodletting to attend to.

The stage of chaos begins on an ancient vessel somewhere on the stormy Aegean Sea, where enormous Hydras and a score of minions have overrun the ship. The game throws you instantly into the action, which is underpinned by an extensive combo system of double-chain blade attacks and magic powers. It's immediately satisfying in its raw intensity and intuitive play scheme, and the visual effect is outstanding. The demo I played was quick and to the point—destroy everything that gets in your way, marvel at the amazing design of it all, feel the rush as the high-impact presentation takes over where the intense melee combat began.

You may get an initial feeling of Devil May Cry when you start launching foes into the air and salivating at the combo-meter building up to showcase your skills. And then you'd see that loose comparison ending real fast, as the game opens up into several robust directions. In the opening stretch of the ship alone, you violently toss a Hydra around by using context-sensitive button sequences and eventually slice down an overhead perch to puncture its bigger accomplice's skull, clamber up a net while tossing the enemy off during the climb, zip down a rope line and teeter across interconnecting beams, and even drop down a gaping hole left by an emerging boss to swim to the next dilapidated section of ship.

God of War is out to take action gaming to a higher level, and if all this elegantly and stylishly handled design moves through an entire game, it has succeeded.
Brady Fiechter

God of War

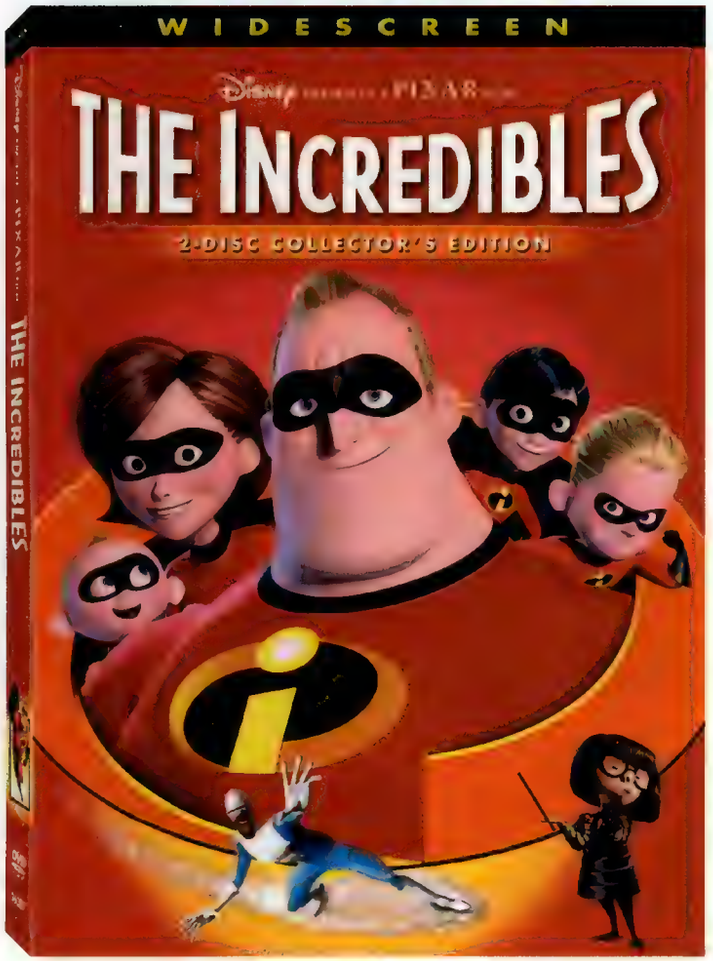
PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

Definitely not for the kiddies; target age is considered "18+."

Developer: Sony Santa Monica **Publisher:** Sony Online: None **Available:** March

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PSYCHONAUTS

And now for something completely different...



Lungfish is much more than your average boss. If you couldn't possibly imagine it, chances are it's in here.

Of all the recent games Microsoft locked up and then subsequently kicked to the curb, Tim Schafer's Psychonauts is among the most puzzling. You can argue that Tork was too simplistic, Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath too superior, Kameo and BC...wait...okay, they're just nuts. Anyway, no matter what your preconceived notions of Psychonauts may be, let me assure you, you have never seen or played anything quite like it. The freshest take on the hub-based platformer since Conker's Bad Fur Day is so avant-garde, it may just breach the demographic barrier and finally reawaken the sleeping giant that not so long ago ruled with an iron fist.

Unbeknownst to us, Psychonauts—psychically armed operatives with massive craniums—are the only thing standing between humanity and those who might jack our brains and turn them into jelly (and all this time I thought it was prime-time sitcoms), and now trouble is brewing in their own backyard, at Psychonauts boot camp, where the minds of childhood freaks are prepped for psychic warfare. Someone is stealing brains for a seriously sinister master plan, and only Raz, the new cadet trying to prove himself before mom picks him up, can stop the madness.

Transferring this folly into a game, über-game mad scientist Tim Schafer and his Double Fine Inc. crew have incorporated all manner of platforming mechanics into a mélange of real and psychic gamescapes, as Raz uses his wits in the real world and his paranormal powers in the extrasensory world to thwart the peril facing the physical realm. Using telekinesis, clairvoyance, fire-starting, etc. as your play mechanics in league with staples like swinging, floating, grappling, shooting, physics challenges and assorted timing and skill moves, there's more—way more—to each surreally surreal world than meets the eye, as Raz

"The world itself—painted with gorgeous textures and normal mapping—is like something out of a waking dream."



must also sort through emotional baggage, clear out mental cobwebs and crack memory vaults, each of which is attached to a chain of events that will have you as intrigued as completely glued.

Although I only sampled about half of a yet-to-be-buttoned-up version—which for a TS game is in itself a miracle—the experience was among the most visually arresting and downright fascinating voyages of discovery I've ever had playing a platformer. The world itself—painted with gorgeous textures and normal mapping—is like something out of a waking dream. Complemented by dark humor, lovingly twisted imagery and character design, insane boss battles and a diversity of play styles as unsullied as anything Tim has ever done—only in an action vein—the overall gist of Psychonauts is, in a word, extraordinary. I have no idea how they'll squeeze this onto PS2 (I'm afraid…very afraid), but with any luck they'll find a way. Poor PS2 conversions mortally wounded Vexx and Sonic Heroes. I hope Double Fine can dodge the bullet. Dave Halverson

Psychonauts

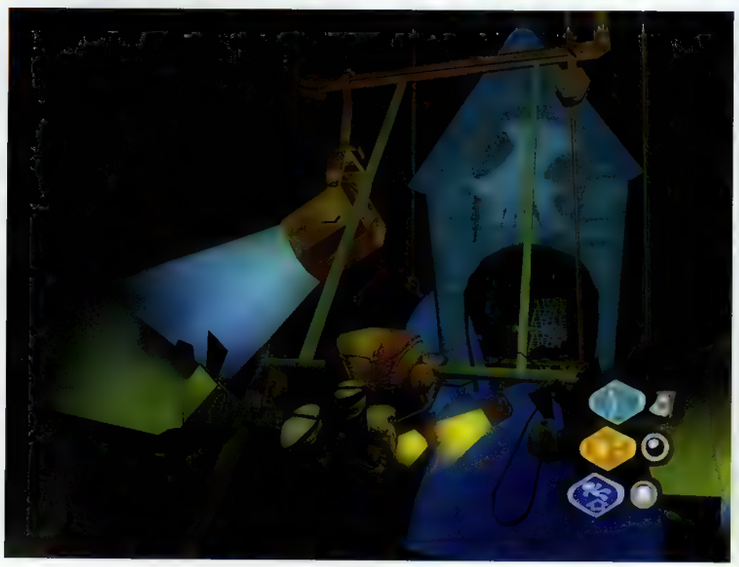
PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Point of Interest

Budcat Creations is porting Psychonauts to the PS2. Can it be done? We'll soon see.

Dev: Double Fine Prod. Inc. **Pub:** Majesco
Available: April









Advent Rising

Majesco's blockbuster IP in the making is almost there... and almost here





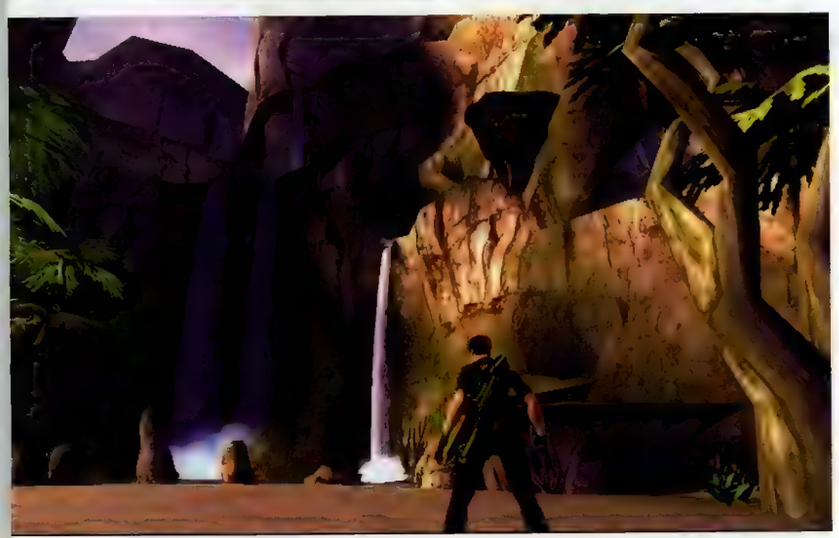


One small step for Gideon Wyeth, one giant leap for integrated storytelling.

As Donald Mustard's vision of the ultimate space opera/action/adventure epic goes into the final 2.5-month stretch, the race is most definitely on. Having incorporated all of the nuances he so vehemently believes will make the difference between just another run-of-the-mill action-adventure and one that will make you jump up and scream "oh hell yeah!" sacrifices have been made and incremental bandages applied throughout the development process, leaving a myriad of needed last-minute tweaks to what we all knew would be an impressive mechanism.

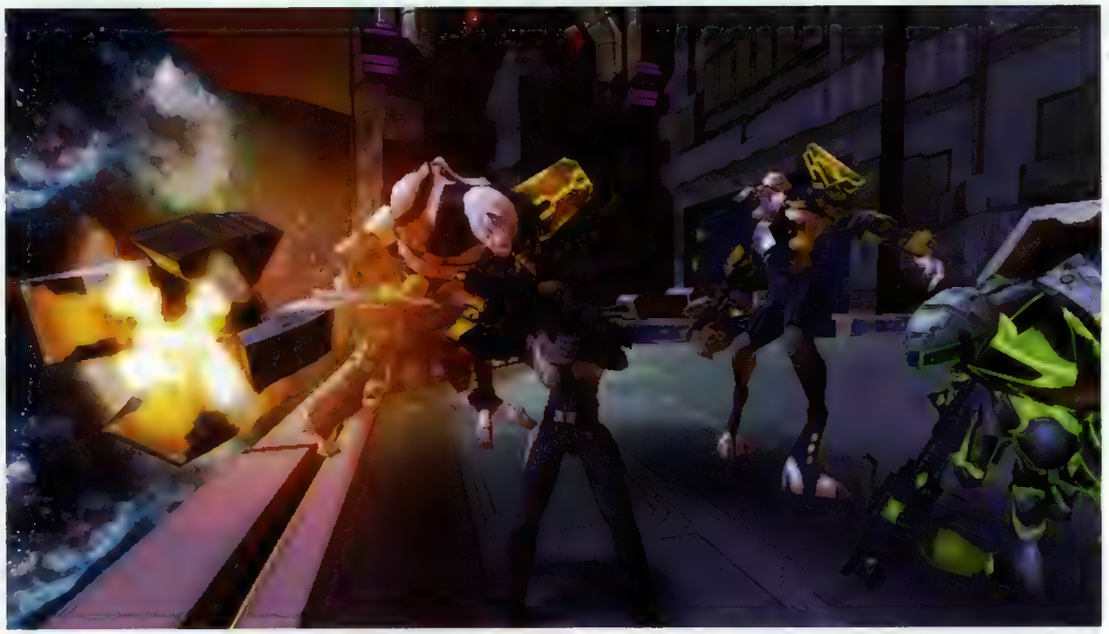
As Donald, in pure Donald fashion, rises out of his chair to proclaim and act out what he feels sets Gideon apart from the protagonist pack (a combination of bullet time, real-time weapons manipulation and force powers), what's happening on screen echoes a game that's sole purpose is the practical application of that vision. Rather than simply sniping a couple of Covenant goons from up high, you can (and Donald does) jump off the precipice in slow motion, somersault in the air firing at one, shed a weapon in mid air, target the other one, land and, with concussive force, send the other reeling back like a rag doll...or you can just land, shoot 'em and move on... So the question beckons: Will anybody play Advent Rising the way Donald has worked so hard to let them, or, as the creatures of habit we've all become, simply find their moves of choice and play it like Max Payne in outer space?

While the main control scheme is



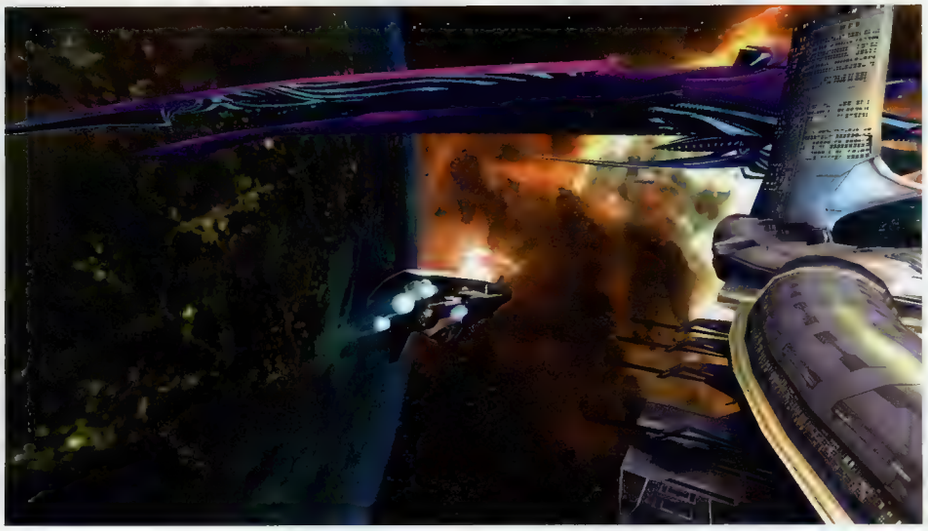
"Advent is going to make us re-think the way we play to some degree, which will either become its calling card or its undoing."

much like Halo's, Gideon's nuances are a measure harder to come to grips with, especially given the either ingenious or not "Flick" targeting system Donald invented, where locking onto enemies is accomplished by simply flicking the right analog in their direction, and then disengaging and reengaging within the vicinity as needed in the same way. It sounds simple enough, though putting it into practice takes a little getting used to, but it does ultimately make you feel like a superhero, which is Donald's aim: "Combat freedom means much more than the player mashing an attack button; it indicates that the player 'chooses' each of the character's actions, all of which can happen simultaneously. For example, imagine the lead character diving off a ledge toward an enemy he is levitating with his right hand, while shooting it with the gun in his left hand and then in the midst of the very same dive, finishing him off with a kick to the head." Advent is going to make us re-think the way we play to some degree, which will either become









its calling card or its undoing. If you don't really use the system, the game plays in pretty standard fashion.

Gameplay devices aside, what troubled me so close to completion was the enemy animation. Creatures leaping from 50 or so feet away jump into Gideon's face in the blink of an eye in what seems like maybe two or three frames, creating a disconnect in the perceived proximity of things. You think you're safe dealing with a character to your immediate right when the one on your left is suddenly beating you senseless. A simple AI tweak will rectify these behavioral snafus, but they are but one of a few areas in need of attention, including frame rates, collision and Gideon's floaty control. They still need desperately to connect him with the ground, else they run the risk of muddy control regardless of how well they nail the game overall. Elsewhere, the game's decision-making elements, level design, revolutionary integrated story and especially soundtrack (possibly Tommy Tallarico's best work ever) are all good to go. At this point, the good far outweighs the bad and Donald assured me that all will be rectified in time for the launch. Advent Rising has all of the makings of an extraordinary new franchise that blends epic storytelling with epic gameplay, and we're confident that Donald and the team at Glyphx Games and Majesco will pull it all together in time for the impending release. We're pulling for this one in a big way. Dave Halverson

Advent Rising

Xbox, PC

Point of Interest

If Advent does well, expect two more games, and possibly a feature film, to go with the graphic novel in progress.

Developer: Glyphx Games **Publisher:** Majesco
Available: May

Close Combat: First to Fight







Developed with the help of the U.S. Marine Corps, First to Fight is an exhilarating squad-based action game where, unlike Full Spectrum Warrior, players actually get to pull the trigger. Your four-man team of Marines has been sent to Beirut, Lebanon, where the battles are usually in confined areas where a single mistake could prove fatal. Each member of your team acts and reacts just as a real Marine would. Clearing rooms, taking out hostiles, securing threats—this is the real deal. Throw in some co-op and competitive online play and you've got the makings of one killer app. Tom Ham

System: Xbox
Developer: Destineer
Publisher: Global Star
Available: March

Zeta Gundam



Following in the footsteps of the quintessential Gundam series, Gundam Seed, the console equivalent is heading to your PS2. For those who like their Gundam with a side order of ancillary goodies, Zeta G offers versus play, 31 new mobile suits and the option to draw your allegiance with either the AEUG or Titans. The game takes place seven years after the end of the One Year War, where the victorious Earth Federation has become corrupt and oppressive, and the elite Titans police force has taken on dictatorial powers; in other words, get ready for a meaty story mode filled with air-to-ground battles. DH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Bandai
Publisher: Bandai
Available: Summer

Rise of the Kasai



Upon news of Rau's death, Rise of the Kasai begins 10 years prior to The Mark of Kri and then jumps to 10 years after as we chronicle Rau's destiny…I smell a twist. Riding on Kri's innovative fighting dynamic, Kasai's hook comes by way of multiple character choices and dynamics. Choosing between Rau and Kuzo, his sister Tati, trainer Baumusu and Griz, a hard-boiled old coot of a warrior, two players can work in tandem; you can split up to cover high/low ground as a team or fight together, switching targets with the tap of a button and watching the insane animation do your bidding. Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Bottlerocket Entertainment Inc.
Publisher: Sony
Available: March



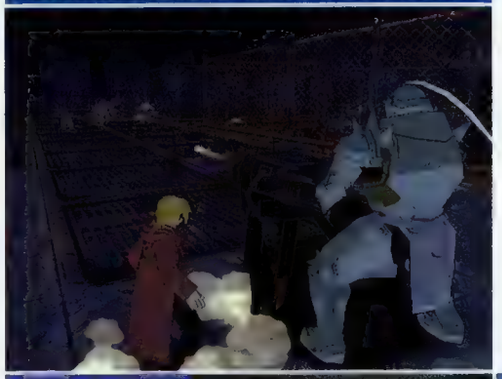
Forza Motorsport



And in this corner…Microsoft Game Studios' answer to GT (to go along with Konami's), Forza Motorsport, is, as expected, yet another cornucopia of racing bliss. I believe the world is now officially sold out of both bells and whistles. Along with every conceivable car you'd ever care to drive, in every class, everywhere on Earth (dramatization), Forza lets you choose your region—which affects which cars you'll have at your disposal—and even toggle the level of realism, which has a direct effect on earnings: The more realistic you go, the higher the rewards. Dave Halverson

System: Xbox
Developer: Microsoft Game Studios
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: May

FullMetal Alchemist 2: Curse of the Crimson Elixer



I know—FMA just came out right? Well, say hello to the prequel and its improved battle system, alchemy and graphics, along with 30 minutes of original animation! While FMA 2 doesn't go back to the origins of Ed and Al's unfortunate date with destiny—resulting from the attempted resurrection of their mother (some bad mojo, that)—it does better mirror the anime. Most noteworthy are the battle upgrades—like Ed's new handblade melee moves, juggles and counters, and Al's new tackle and spinning sweep—along with much better movement and visual depth. Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Racjin Co Ltd.
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: Spring





MotoGP 3: Ultimate Racing Technology



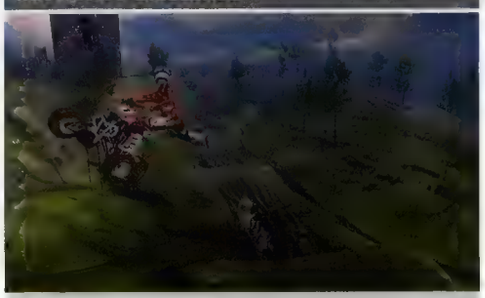
Making one of the best racers out there even better—so much so that you'll need this badly—MGP3 boasts an Extreme mode consisting of 16 new city and suburban TT-style tracks based on actual race locations from around the globe, from the neon-lit streets of Japan to the country roads around Donington, along with 16 original bikes modeled on real-world 600cc to 1200cc super bikes. And for you Live junkies out there, MotoGP 3 offers three brand-new features: embedded online gameplay, spectator mode and commentator mode. Plus, just look at it…it makes me well up. Dave Halverson

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Climax
Publisher: THQ
Available: Summer





MX vs. ATV Unleashed

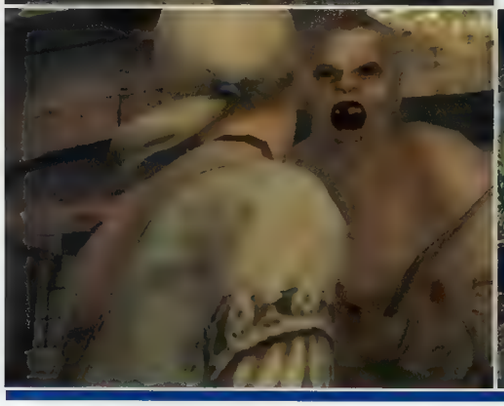


Only Rainbow Studios has enough balls—and the physics engine—to combine quads and motocross bikes into one grand multi-faceted racer and then allow them to mix it up. This is easily the best racing game out of Rainbow since they shocked the world with the first ATV Offroad Fury. Along with ATVs and motocross bikes, they've even shoehorned in sand-rails, bi-planes and 4x4 golf carts! Early indicators point to all systems go in all the venues, including freestyle, hill climbs, Super Moto (yes!), Way Point, Monster Mash and a few more wacky ones… Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Rainbow Studios
Publisher: THQ
Available: March

Haunting Ground







Setting a survival horror title in a castle—now we're talking. The setup: a young girl loses her parents in a car accident, waking up after the tragedy somewhere deep within the castle walls. After a little exploration, you run into a psychotic old man named Debilitas who maniacally chases you throughout the search for escape. Because you're weak and feeble, the game adds a very cool element into the mix by providing camaraderie with a shepherd dog, which must be coaxed to aid in a multitude of tasks. Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: May

Without Warning



Remember that Tomb Raider game? The guys who created it founded the new CiRCLE studios, and Without Warning is their first project. The game is set in a present-day U.S. chemical plant, which is being overrun by terrorists. The story unfolds over a 12-hour period, focusing on six central figures whose actions interlock as the events begin to boil over. You alternately assume the role of each character throughout the conflict, observing each other's consequences in disjointed sections of the story's timeline. Think of it as sort of an episode of *24*, which the team cites as a big influence. Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: CiRCLE Studios
Publisher: Capcom
Available: November

Constantine



Based on the new Keanu Reeves movie, which is in turn based on the Hellblazer comic books, Constantine is a virtual descent into hell. The story has main character John Constantine heading into the netherworld to obtain weapons to fight evil—and brutal weapons they are, including guns like the Crucifier, which nails enemies to walls, and magic powers like Hunger, where maggots feast on enemies. Using water as a conduit, Constantine can teleport between the normal world and the hell dimension, thus adding some puzzle elements into the action. Constantine should be out by the time you read this. CH

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Bits Studio
Publisher: THQ
Available: February

Enthusia Professional Racing







By now, Konami has no doubt grown accustomed to seeing their game mentioned in the same breath as Gran Turismo, and the wait to put these two games head-to head is very nearly over. In the meantime, Enthusia further demonstrates that it is not content being a GT clone, with its own set of ideas about what constitutes a perfect driving simulator. Eschewing car tuning in favor of even greater physics detail and driver feedback, Enthusia is promisingly different, right down to its very addictive and unique Revolution training mode. Graphically, GT4 does seem to be a slight cut above, but Konami's got nothing to be ashamed about. Mike Hobbs

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Studios
Publisher: Konami
Available: March


LEARN TO SPEAK GETAWAY
...and tell 'em this time I don't want claret all over the boot of my motor!
I want those geezers tooled up. Shooters, knuckledusters, the lot.
Straight off the back of a lorry. Fancy a butcher's?
Piss off or I'll sort you out!
I didn't know she was a bloody grass.
You wanna get nicked? Bloke in the corner looks like Old Bill.
Just give me the reddies, you tosser.
Better not be telling porkies, luv, or you'll be wearin' a Chelsea smile.

Preview Gallery

Tekken 5



The more we see of the latest installment in Namco's bare-fisted fighting series, the more excited we get. Aside from a minimum of 32 characters straight from the coin-op, including unlockable fighters like Anna Williams (Nina's sister), Baek San Doo (Hwoarang's master), Roger Jr. (yes, another boxing kangaroo) and Wang Jinrei (that old Chinese dude), look for a character customization feature that lets players outfit their fighters in new costumes and accessories, and a new story twist involving the true founder of the Mishima Zaibatsu. The original Tekken is also rumored to be unlockable—very cool. Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: March

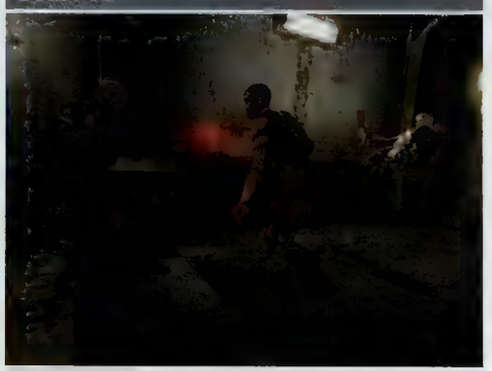
FlatOut



With all of the racing sims released recently, it's nice to see a game that doesn't take itself too seriously. FlatOut is a balls-to-the-wall demolition-style racing game that boasts some pretty slick graphics, easy-to-pick-up gameplay and some pretty inventive minigames. There are over 36 tracks and 16 different cars to choose from—sorry, no licensed vehicles, but each car has 40 damage points with three damage levels, so prepare for some carnage. If you hit a car at just the right angle, you can even watch the driver fly out, showing off some pretty cool rag doll physics. Tom Ham

System: Xbox
Developer: BugBear Entertainment
Publisher: Empire Interactive
Available: June

Cold Fear



Tom Hansen works for the Coast Guard, and he's also a zombie slayer, called into duty after responding to a distress call on a spooky Russian whaling ship. Along with some freakish creatures, the living dead in question are some nicely malformed sailors who shamble through the dark halls, effectively armed with weapons. This storm-ravaged ship is proving to be a very effective device for mood, but more interestingly, it's also providing a different angle for puzzle solving and exploration as the ship gets tossed around by the choppy ocean. Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Darkworks
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: March

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Melee



While the last TMNT game didn't live up to many players' expectations, the heroes in the half shell are back nonetheless, and this time in an arena-based fighting game. Mutant Melee looks a lot like the battle mode packed into Battle Nexus, but it promises to be much deeper, with more than 20 characters to choose from, including Splinter, Casey, April and Shredder, not to mention several new modes for up to four players, such as King of the Hill and Last Man Standing. Too bad Konami didn't title it Tournament Fighters 2. Chris Hoffman

System: GameCube, Xbox, PC
Developer: KCE Hawaii
Publisher: Konami
Available: March

Pariah







Welcome to the kitchen sink! Digital Extremes' Pariah has all the makings of a true sleeper hit. This exceptional-looking story-driven FPS combines tried-and-true FPS gameplay with its own unique devices such as healing injections and remote detonation concussion grenades that send enemies flying. As you can see, the environments are second to almost none; the story plays out like an old Arnold movie, and touches like in-game dramatic slo-mo, real-time plasma splats and realistic destructible environmental factors really paint a purdy picture. Dave Halverson

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Digital Extremes
Publisher: Groove
Available: May

the Getaway Black Monday

How was I supposed to know she was a snitch?

Get lost or I'll hurt you!

I've got some stolen goods. Want to take a look?

You wanna go to jail? Guy in the corner looks like a cop.

Make sure they're armed to the teeth. Guns, brass knuckles...the works.

...and they better not get blood all over the trunk of my car!

Give me the money, you jerk.

You better not be lying, or I'll fix that pretty smile of yours.

Ruthless cops. Vicious criminals. Petty thieves. On the brutal streets of London, they all speak the same language. Learn it. With three playable characters, 25 miles of authentic locations, enhanced graphics and realistic A.I., your life depends on it.







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MATURE 17+

M

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Nudity
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

PlayStation.2

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inside ODDWORLD

Stranger things have happened

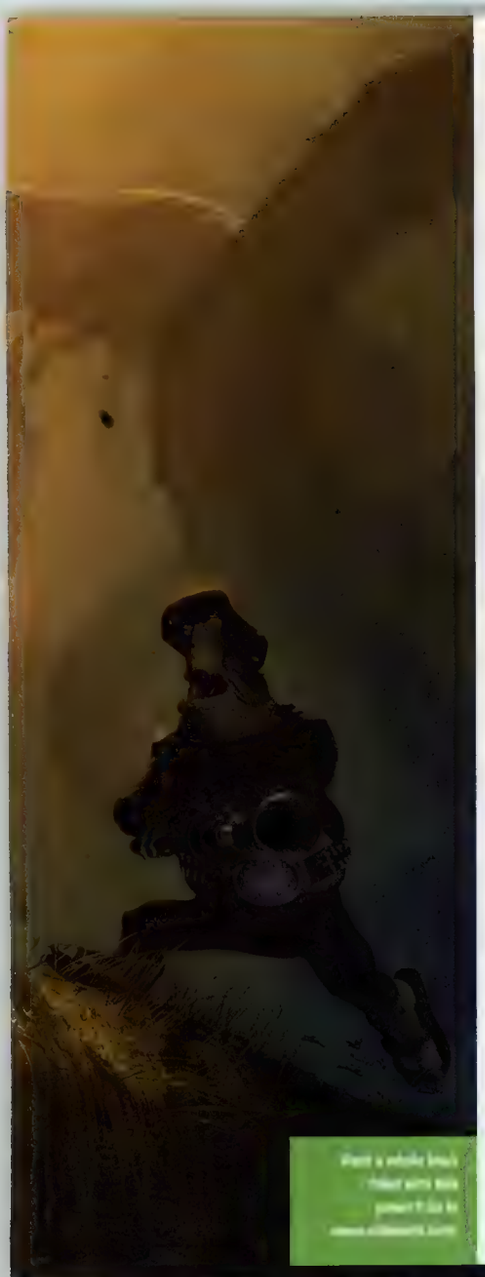
In the world of video game journalism, provided you eat, drink and sleep it, each new game is like a microcosm. Good, bad or indifferent, the art of game design, and therefore the depiction of it, is a fascinating endeavor, especially when a game affects you to such a degree that it becomes a permanent record in your best video game moments memory file.

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, like only Symphony of the Night before it, surpassed even my loftiest expectations. The castle turning upside-down in Symphony and now the mid-game epiphany in Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath both made me stop and actually call people (well, now I can IM them) out of sheer jubilation. In Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath's case, just as I was hoping they'd take the adventure off the beaten earn-as-you-go path and open up the story, they did, with the single coolest in-game twist I've ever experienced. We've become so conditioned to the methodology of collecting money as a means of progression; Oddworld plants us square in that mode and then yanks the chair out from under us. Finally, someone grew some balls in this industry! Pardon my vulgarity, but it's about time someone snapped their fingers. Aside from being one of the most art-soaked and altogether beautiful games ever made, Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath broke the mold in an era when doing so is rare. A four-hour drive up the coast to personally show our gratitude was imminent...

"Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath broke the mold in an era when doing so is rare."

Walking into Oddworld, you begin to see why the games they create are so unique and untarnished. Nestled above a Ross (yep, the cheesy clothing outlet) on a street that resembles Marty McFly's stomping grounds, unless you knew there were people making games nearby, you'd never realize they were there. Once inside, however, the place is so covered with concept art and one-of-a-kind memorabilia, you have to sign an NDA to cross the threshold. The amount of art these folks create for a single game is humbling. Everywhere you look, there are reams of colored art, sculptures, plaques and awards... and that's all before you get to the conference room, where, given a sleeping bag, any hardcore gamer would be more than happy to take up permanent residence. If the three-plus-foot-tall bronze Stranger sculpture doesn't get you, the museum-quality floor-to-ceiling Oddworld paintings will; it's like stepping back in time to when developers had control of their games and had fun making them, just as I imagined it must be while playing their latest game.

Everyone at Oddworld is plugged into president and visionary Lorne Lanning's unique vision, because Lorne opens himself up to his devout creative staff while working alongside an admin team that's just as excited and on board. I've never met a CEO as excited and friendly as Sherry McKenna, who seems every









bit as plugged into the game as the staff of über-talented artists, programmers and designers who compiled and sifted through piles of R&D to achieve this ambitious vision. The initial design document for Stranger alone is like three inches thick. The time taken developing his transition from a walk to a full gallop is more than most characters get during an entire development cycle, not to mention his look, as Oddworld endeavored to merge gorilla, horse, lion and Clint Eastwood after an unnervingly violent cracking sound coming from Lorne's backyard—which turned out to be two bucks going head to head—sent him on a quest to create his Steef. Knowing full well that most gamers, and more importantly Microsoft, wouldn't embrace a four-legged freak from the outset, Steef was evolved into Stranger, only to be de-evolved before our eyes during that fateful moment when his true form is revealed. Lorne molded his creature into a more traditional hero only to unleash his true vision after the player got hooked: brilliant.

Aside from being the most beautiful, art-soaked 3D adventure ever created in these United States, Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath is a profound look at discrimination in reverse. Rather than taking us from misfit to superhero, the game takes us from superhero to misfit, to the honor in self-acceptance. If all we ever did in Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath was wrangle bad guys with Fuzzles, Boombats and the rest of Stranger's quiver of crossbow rangers, the game would have been great, but given the spirit of invention and true love of gaming that resonates through the halls of Oddworld, we instead find ourselves on the receiving end of a game that truly raises the standard of storytelling as well as gameplay. Dave Halverson



Once upon a time, art director met businesswoman, and the rest is history: Oddworld president Lorne Lanning and CEO Sherry McKenna.



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Bio hazard



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D
Now playing: A bunch of new stuff
Thought of the Month: All I can think about is Conker! Must...have...Conker.



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: NBA Street Vol. 3
Thought of the Month: The PSP really is that awesome. Believe the hype.



Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

Chris has been playing games since the days of the 2600, back when graphics were blocks and plotlines were barely afterthoughts. Maybe that's why he considers gameplay first when reviewing most genres, and why he pays special attention to all things handheld. He also feels that a great story can be equally compelling, thus his love of RPGs.

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Zelda: Minish Cap
Thought of the Month: I finally comprehend the lyrics to Neo Contra!



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: SWAT 4
Thought of the Month: Sometimes, budget is everything.



Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

To Ashley, video games are like magnificent pieces of art: you don't break down the piece as a whole to comment on the brush stroke method or colors used. She thanks her mother for playing Castlevania II after school, and everyone in elementary school for shunning her, because without them, her obsession with gaming would not have been possible.

Favorite genres: Action, RPG, adventure
Now playing: Sid Meier's Pirates, SWG
Thought of the Month: In Star Wars Galaxies, healers heal. Fencers fence. Smugglers do not smuggle. Discuss.



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Zelda: Minish Cap
Thought of the month: I already have my PSP hahahahaha!

Reviews

March 2005

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Game of the Month



Resident Evil 4 058

Not only is it the best Resident Evil yet, but all the annoyances of the series have been lifted, leaving nothing but incredible presentation, breathtaking visuals and emotionally charged gameplay.

New Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. It's always wise to refer to the text.

10 Perfect
9 Extraordinary
8 Great
7 Good
6 Decent
5 Average
4 Below average
3 Poor
2 Bad
1 Terrible

TIMESPLITTERS
Future Perfect
Not your typical first-person shooter







For a first-person shooter to ultimately succeed, the obvious action quotient has to be highly charged, immediate and visceral, and it has to run on a foundation of engaging enemy patterns. TimeSplitters Future Perfect has all this, looks good, sounds good, and is an entertaining success. But what this game contains that is totally removed from everything else out there is a quirky, infectious, humorous character, one that seems to deeply reflect the personality of its makers. When you play it, you really sense a stamp of originality and zany flavor in its presentation and structure.

"...you really sense a stamp of originality and zany flavor in its presentation and structure."

The game plays fast and simple, giving you a gratification that never grows old, no matter how straightforward its course. You shoot stuff, drive vehicles, blow up barrels—you know the drill—but Free Radical injects that personal charge that makes everything crackle. And given the time-traveling theme, where every level is dramatically different in flavor, new guns and scenarios freshen the action. There's even a haunted house level, where baseball bats become the weapon of choice to lop off the heads of zombies.

Every area has a helper involved, unique to the time period. Prepare for aid from a perky pig-tailed gal who shakes it real good—the overt sexual overtones are a riot and play for satirical fun—and a '60s special agent who shakes his hips real good as he informs you of the Brotherhood of Ultra Science and proclaims, "I've never had this much fun with a guy before," while he scales the cars of a train on the path to a villain with a nuclear-missile-arming cat. There may be first-person shooters out there with a lot more scope and dimension, but TimeSplitters Future Perfect and its classic gaming dynamics is a special kick.

And that online stuff's a blast too, even if it's more of the same. The effortless movement and precision of the combat translates well to the online arena, and coming back for more is the old TimeSplitters level editor. It'd be shame if this game and its humor and pluck go unnoticed. So take notice, people; Halo will still be there when you're done with TimeSplitters Future Perfect. Brady Fiechter



Your arsenal of weapons follows the theme of the level.



TimeSplitters Future Perfect **8.0**

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube — Score

Tons of personality and unusually distinct look and feel.

Could use more detail and a finer-honed engine.

Dev: Free Radical Design **Pub:** Electronic Arts
Online: 16p multiplayer **Available:** March

THE EPIC JAK TRILOGY IS COMING TO ITS DRAMATIC CONCLUSION.

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the answers,

the end of the epic.

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Comic Mischief
Language
Mild Violence
Suggestive Themes

PlayStation.2

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Ys

The Ark of Napishtim

The flame of Ys—still burning bright



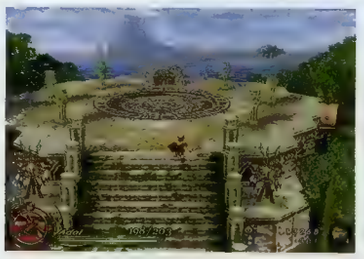
To this day, my memories of the first Ys are as pristine as any recent game I've played—its field battles, complex dungeons, epic boss battles and soaring score forever embedded in my mind…which is why I don't dare ever lay hands on it again. In reality, I was knocking my nugget-shaped sprite into other differently shaped sprites, interrupted by the odd battle won or lost by how leveled up I was at the time while listening to some of the most majestic music ever created. All these years and not so great sequels later, the religious-to-the-first new Ys: The Ark of Napishtim—adapted from the Japanese PC game with added console accoutrements—elevates the original formula to euphoric levels by Ys standards, as the precursor to games like Baldur's Gate.

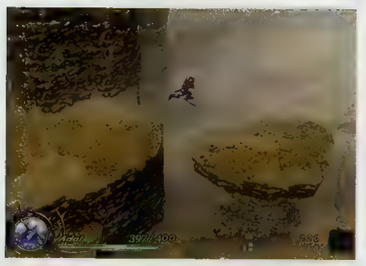
When our old friend Adol Christin finds himself washed up into the middle of a turf war within an island chain on the brink of a great vortex (The Great Vortex of Canaan to be exact), there's only one thing to do: talk with everyone in the nearest town, level up in the fields, conquer increasingly difficult dungeons and beat down massive beasts at their ends, conjured by your friendly neighborhood near-naked evil fairy holding the loot you need to progress. As I so often say, more of the same only better can be a very good thing, and Ark is a perfect example. In lieu of the myriad of big-budget ultra-realistic epics clogging the backwards aisles of our gluttonous superstores, sometimes it's cool to suspend disbelief and go back to what got us here in the first place—aiding villagers and killing monsters. Not that Falcom hasn't updated Ys for a new generation; aside from the obvious graphical enhancements (the game is quite beautiful), all that leveling up, which is now actually endearing fun, is not in vain. Amidst all that exploding monster DNA of gold coins and MP and HP crystals is a mineral called Emel, used for imbuing the three swords Adol can access on the fly in synch with the topography; the fields are now much larger, nicely tiered and often privy to some cool platforming; and weapon and armor upgrades now appear on Adol's wee frame. Together with the game's beautiful environments, endearing tribes, and trials and tribulations (though trite, they're still strangely engaging), this is about as good as old-school action-role playing gets. I have to admit, the tried-and-true equipping and accessorizing system that's been a staple from the beginning comes across better than ever. For all the monkeying around with attributes companies have done over the last decade, this ancient system is still among the best. Save beacons a la Baldur's are also a nice touch. Dying in Ark never sets you back more than a few minutes.

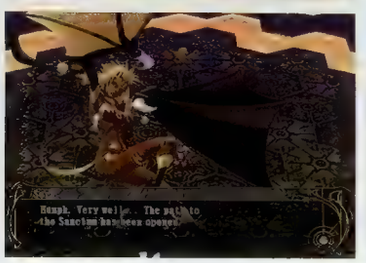


"…sometimes it's cool to suspend disbelief and go back to what got us here in the first place—aiding villagers and killing monsters."

As quixotic as the original and at the same time better in every way, it's ironic that the only area Ark doesn't at least sustain is the music, which is odd seeing as how it's what made Ys so beloved in the first place. With enough Ys CDs out in Japan to fill an iPod—hours and hours of arguably the best symphonic game music ever recorded—it's puzzling why they chose to apply a mostly mediocre soundtrack in comparison (it's very good by current standards, which are sadly crap compared to what we used to get), but the game succeeds at what it endeavors to nevertheless. In a perfect world, Falcom would have given Yuzo Koshiro a call and given us all another opus to permanently etch into our brains, but I'll take this with a smile. Dave Halverson







Ys: The Ark of Napishtim **7.5**

PlayStation 2

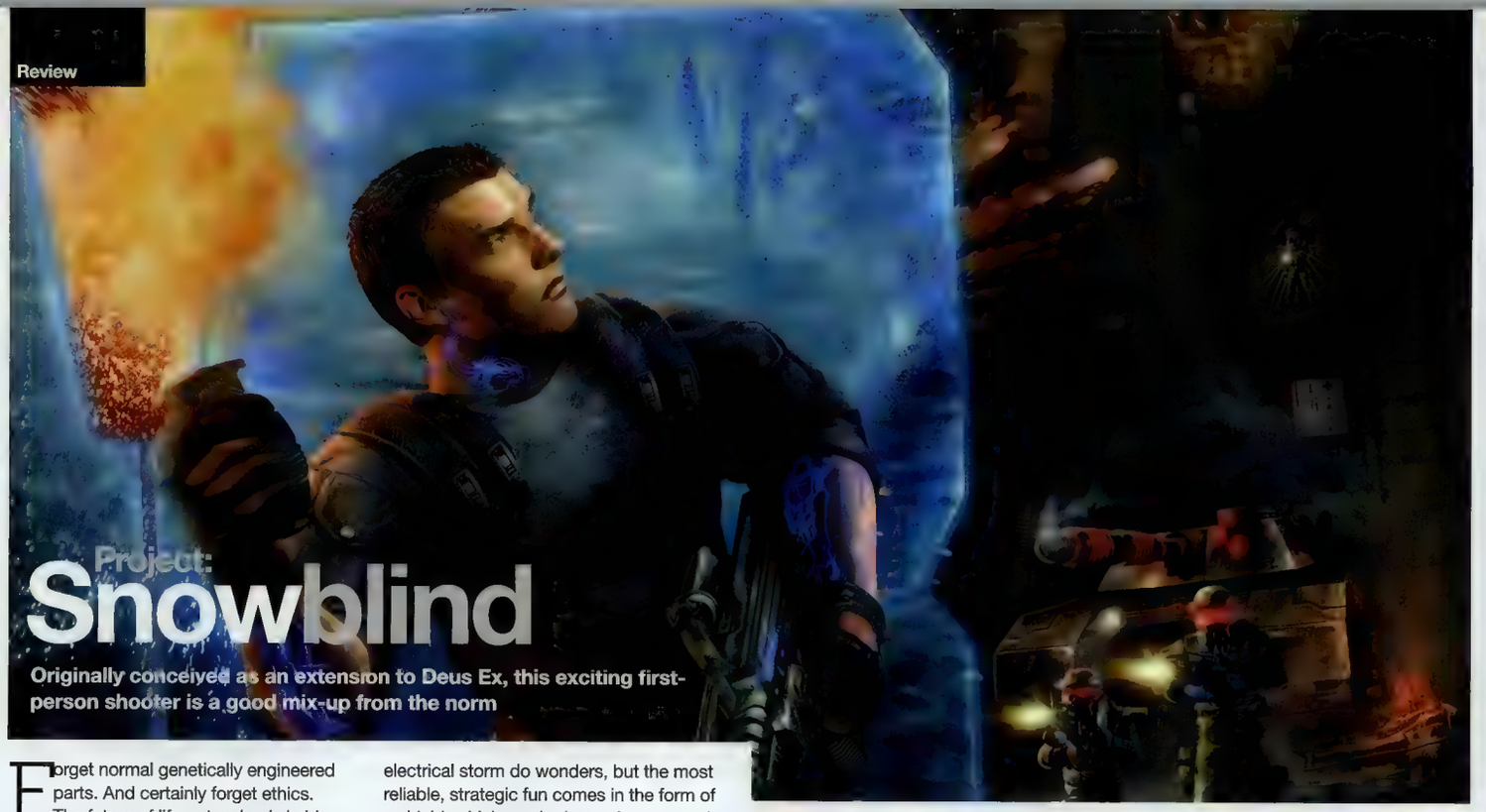
+ Old-school action-role-playing at its finest: cool towns, cool monsters, cool labyrinths, big bosses.

− Music doesn't live up to the namesake. Overly simplistic play mechanics over the long haul.

Developer: Falcom **Publisher:** Konami
Online: None **Available:** March



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Project: Snowblind

Originally conceived as an extension to Deus Ex, this exciting first-person shooter is a good mix-up from the norm

Forget normal genetically engineered parts. And certainly forget ethics. The future of life-extension is in bio-augmentation, a fusing of the organic with the powerfully mechanical, particularly good for creating a super-soldier like 2nd Lieutenant Nathan Frost. A war is raging, and you're fighting for the good guys in an effort to thwart a release of giant EMP bomb set to be unleashed on Paris, New York and Tokyo.

Before his hero duties in Project: Snowblind go into full effect, Frost loses his life in a nasty skirmish, resurrected in the operating room and sent back into battle with some nifty new skills that nicely alter the familiar first-person shooter formula. A cloaking device and enhanced vision are just the beginning. A reflex boost and electrical storm do wonders, but the most reliable, strategic fun comes in the form of a shield, which can be instantly accessed as long as your energy stores are properly charged. If you bite it, systems can be brought back online with the life-giving juice of a nano boost.

In this stylishly conceived world born of sleek cyberpunk influences and visually rich Asian flair, mechs roam the streets, heavily armed and looking to squash any feeble soldier in their path. Security bots float through corridors looking for suspect movement. Some of the more engaging enemies cast their own shields and cloaks. Mechanical spiders crawl in the rafters, waiting to apply a shock that renders you snowblind—a disorienting static that leaves biomodified soldiers temporarily helpless.





Enemy designs join the high-concept visuals

"...Project: Snowblind calls on the best of what we enjoy about the genre, but the game feels nicely removed from the norm."



The skillfully crafted Project: Snowblind calls on the best of what we enjoy about the genre, but the game feels nicely removed from the norm. Part of that is its arresting setting; part of that is its creative mix of weapons and devices. Because almost everything in the game is linked to some form of electronic makeup, objects like the EMP grenade and Herf Gun—sends a charged ball that sticks on surfaces and casts arcs—are important in disabling systems, making the final kill much more efficient. Riot walls can be erected for a unique line of defense in the nastiest firefights, and spider bots are a safe long-distance weapon when you need a more distractive, surreptitious approach. Staple weapons like a shotgun and rocket launcher play their satisfying part, but things really get uniquely entertaining when you use guns like the Flechette, which shoots off a swarm of energy that intelligently hones in on multiple threats at a time. Part of the fun with that one is watching the enemy freak out in confusion.

Hacking into computers and the occasional use of vehicle also comes into play, but fitting into the only real negative for Project: Snowblind, these are areas that aren't developed quite enough. The game is a big success on many levels—even the dialogue and music play a superb role—stumbling mostly in a need for more of everything.

Perhaps that more you may desire resides in the well-designed online arena, which implements the unique aspects of Project: Snowblind around the obvious deathmatch and capture-the-flag matches. For industry veteran Crystal Dynamic's first attempt at the genre, their personal touch has resulted in one fine first-person shooter package. Brady Fiechter

Project: Snowblind **8.5** Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

+ The cyberpunk influences create a truly unique world.

- There are tons of unique gameplay elements, but they need to be fleshed out.

Developer: Crystal Dynamics **Publisher:** Eidos
Online: 16-player DM, CTF, etc **Available:** February

THREE SWORDS OF POWER.
ONE HERO TO MASTER THEM.

Ys
THE ARK OF NAPISHTIM



Fight enemies and huge bosses in real-time with special sword attacks and combinations!



Unleash the powers of Wind, Fire and Thunder with 3 elemental swords!



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TEEN
T
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation 2

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Champions
Return to Arms

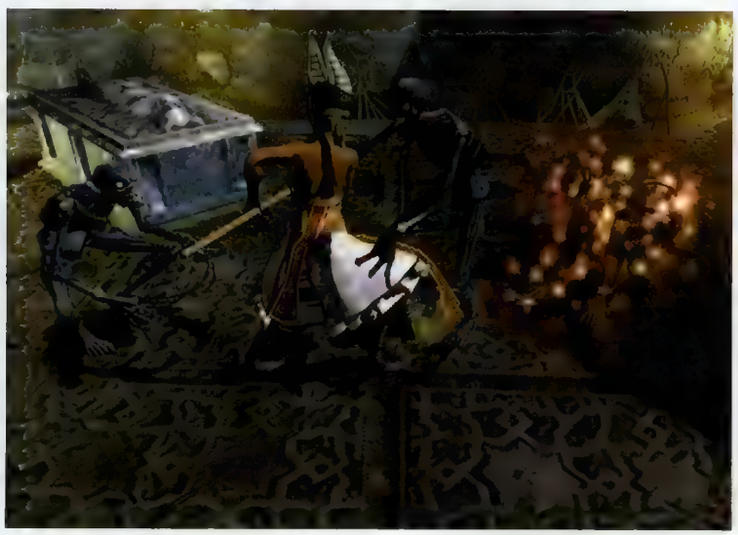
Return to the world of EverQuest for a classic good time

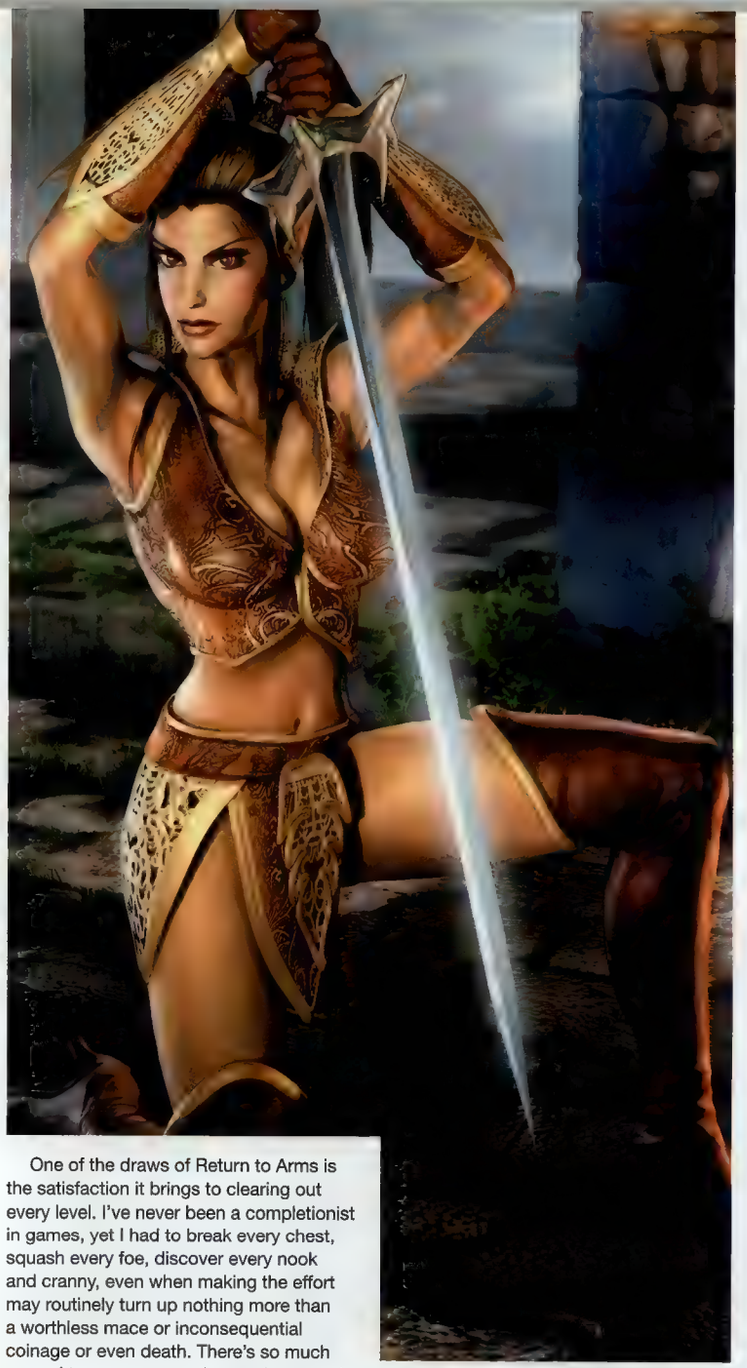
Champions: Return to Arms fits faithfully in the top-down action-RPG genre, comfortably sticking to formula and staying true to everything that's marked these games since the beginning: monsters and goblins and many other D&D-like creatures terrorize the land, the land is dominated by labyrinthine dungeons, these dungeons and the minions infecting them belch forth an insane amount of items and gear for outfitting and selling, experience rewarded throughout the journey builds and builds until the hero goes from putz to mythical warrior. A dramatic genre-shakeup this game is not, so take it for what it is: an entertaining, classically spun game that looks, feels, sounds and presents its story on par with the best that's come before it. For now, it still works.

Before you set out to tackle all the demonic mayhem and reign savior supreme, a character of choice must be decided upon. As you'd expect from the source material that inspires the detail-oriented Return to Arms, several important classes get their representation, offering strengths and weaknesses accordingly. Part of the game's pleasure is watching your character grow, and it does keenly affect gameplay if you, say, choose a long-range attacker perhaps dominated by magic use over the brute force of an in-your-face warrior. Mixing and matching character types is especially fun when you bring a friend into the mix or go online—certainly the most satisfying way to make the journey.

And it does feel like a journey through a quaint, purely fantastical world, what with all the spirited settings and distant lands you travel to, all gorgeously detailed thanks to the nature of the engine, and especially appealing with the nice attention to atmosphere and subtleties. The tremendous repetition of combat and endless armies of enemies that come your way are, of course, what you've come to expect from the genre, but give Return to Arms credit for maintaining an acceptable level of strategy and balance to the action. The right weapon and magic combination can definitely make a difference, and blocking does come into play, but after a while, there's not profoundly more here than simply smashing away until the area is clean; the intricate level structure and boss battles help add to the illusion of a broader objective beyond a deadening, endless march of death.

"...give Return to Arms credit for maintaining a good level of strategy and balance to the action."





One of the draws of Return to Arms is the satisfaction it brings to clearing out every level. I've never been a completionist in games, yet I had to break every chest, squash every foe, discover every nook and cranny, even when making the effort may routinely turn up nothing more than a worthless mace or inconsequential coinage or even death. There's so much ground to cover, so much experience and leveling up to do, you'd think the course would grow weary in time. And yet the game moves forward with a headless addiction that satisfies to the end. Brady Fiechter



Champions: Return to Arms **7.5**

PlayStation 2

Atmospheric settings, excellent attention to details, combat as good as this genre gets.

We've definitely done this before; feels a bit dated, and the story is weak.

Dev: Snowblind Studios **Pub:** Sony Online Ent.
Online: 4p multiplayer **Available:** February







Star Wars
Republic Commando

Screw the Force; lock and load!





Games like Star Wars: Republic Commando reaffirm the staying power of first-person shooters as long as they endeavor to stretch the envelope with added story and atmosphere. There is the chance my predilection with SWRC stems from skipping Rainbow Six and every other war-time FPS this side of Conker's Bad Fur Day, but I'm pretty sure it's really just a great game. For starters, I love that it's not the typical *Star Wars* game: It doesn't even begin with the trademark text stream—the horror! Rather, you're a clone commando, readymade, briefed, introduced to your team and then airdropped into the middle of an alien hot zone. No Jedi malarkey, tomes of lore or character creation to muck up the works—just a fantastically modeled set of exteriors and interiors host to some seriously meaty team warfare.

The story comes beamed directly into your visor as you systematically and seamlessly perform each operation. Assigning squad mates to their potential posts—via "search and destroy," "form up" or "secure area"—is both easy and fun, and extremely well integrated into the exchange via the tactical visor's holographic display. Simply target the site and, with a single button press, the right man for the job will spring into action, setting bombs, hacking networks, sniping, whatever. Healing is wicked cool too. If you find yourself pinned down between bacta dispensers—where healing is carried out exactly like squad commands—and a fellow clone goes down, you can reach out and jump-start him with an armload of pulse-pounding energy. Vice-versa, should you find yourself headed for a dirt nap, you can call on a chum to do you the same favor. The only way to truly fail is to have the entire squad killed, in which case you really should re-do the level and re-think your strategy while you're at it.

On the visual front, this is without a doubt the finest-looking game in the *Star Wars* arsenal; in fact, it far outshines its counterparts. Interiors are ultra-detailed, uniquely diverse, impeccably textured and modeled (with extreme wall depth and fantastic lighting and textures), and the exteriors emit a sense of openness and tumult that make you feel like you really are amidst a bitter lunar war. The Karma physics engine provides some jaw-dropping moments as well, and some of the nastier mecha-arachnoids warrant a slow, savory death as you marvel at their construction. Tactical, yet just as fun as any single-player romp, skillfully laid out and nicely scored, Star Wars: Republic Commando lives up to its billing and then some. *Star Wars* is definitely at its best at war. Dave Halverson

Star Wars: Republic Commando

8.5 Score

Xbox, PC

+ So nice to play a Star Wars game less about baggage and more about kicking ass. Sweet controls, epic feel.

− A few minor frame rate hiccups, but only when things look so awesome you could care less; can get a teensy bit repetitive.

Developer: LucasArts **Publisher:** LucasArts
Online: 16p DM, CTF **Available:** March



"...you're a clone commando, readymade, briefed, introduced to your team and then air-dropped into the middle of an alien hot zone."



Musashi Samurai Legend

Little samurai, BIG swords, giant heart

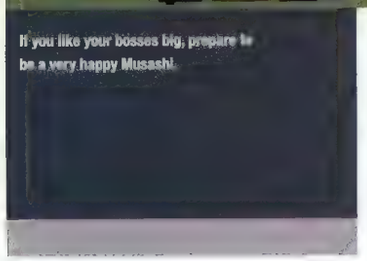
Back in 1998, action fans reveled in Brave Fencer Musashi, the first 3D action-adventure from Square crafted by none other than Hironobu Sakaguchi, creator of the Final Fantasy series. Outstanding if not revolutionary in certain ways, it's surprising that it's taken so many years to make Musashi's acquaintance again, but I can assure you it was worth the elongated wait. With Takashi Tokita (FFIV, Parasite Eve) taking over producer duties, along with return engagements from legendary character designer Tetsuya Nomura (who astonishes as only he can once again here) and director Yoichi Yoshimoto, Musashi: Samurai Legend is a thoroughbred Square concern, which loosely translates as special to the core...if you like *video games*. If you like cap poppin', war or realistic death simulations, turn the page now. Getting back to the name dropping: Gainax, one of anime's most renowned studios (responsible for such masterworks as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*) took on animation duties for Musashi's animation sequences, so, of course, the opening cinema is without equal. CG has and will never be able to express action and über-cool like traditional animation. If you don't believe me, I have two words for you: *Kill Bill*.

Moving on, Musashi is summoned into our midst once again when Anthedon—a majestic city riding on the back a great sky whale—falls under siege from the maniacal President Gandrake of Gandrake Enterprises, who's begun snatching mystics to usurp their magic energy for his Nebulim Engine. The invention that once brought prosperity to the people is being turned on them, as fantastical evil video game corporations so often do, leaving them no choice but to invoke Vocatus Heroa, which, once again, renders a diminutive, attitude-addled blue-coifed midget samurai. Just as the Anthedon Princess completes the summoning ritual, she too is captured, leaving the unlikely hero Musashi, along with his newfound master, the feline Mr. Miyagi, Mew, to set things right.

Post training (she missed by a mile, so Musashi and Mew get to play in the jungle before reaching Anthedon), any gamer worth his salt will instantly recognize Musashi: Samurai Legend's time-honored







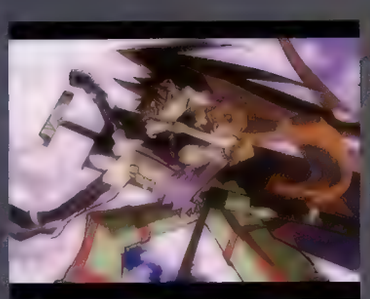
Japanese framework *rumble of applause* stemming from a central location where we find Musashi's temporary residence (and save spot) and more and more citizens, as Anthedon slowly repopulates when Musashi frees its captives. Heading out to free five maidens who hold dominion over the five swords he needs to do the deed (toast Gandrake minion by minion and then deal with him) and get back home, the underlying course of action is to free townsfolk who, upon returning, become integral to the plight. "Free 'em then go see 'em" is pretty much the rule, although they've been so gracious as to place a red dot on the map should you ever find yourself in a quandary. Mystics are freed by simply striking the barriers that bind them, while maidens must be actually carried to safety—one of many skill devices in the Musashi gameplay arsenal. Normally Musashi can perform any number of sword strikes to dispatch Gandrake's drones, but when he's carrying a maiden, he can either set her down (not recommended) or toss her into the air, strike with lightning speed, then catch her and move on—obviously the more gallant course of action. Swordplay is a major component in the game, hinging on forging each new sword with minerals found in each quest (once you free the blacksmith) and through duplication—the original Musashi hook that helped make the original so...original. Utilizing a Zelda-like lock-on technique, if Musashi's reticule is blue, he can duplicate an enemy's attack by remaining locked on while a gauge fills and then quickly reacting to their attack. Once duplicated, special strikes cost MP, but become key in the game's formidable, oft-times swarming exchanges. The swordplay in Musashi literally never stops evolving. And other gameplay devices to evolve Musashi are as cleverly thought through: Attaining the double jumping, for instance, is tied to freeing Anthedon's inventor and then providing him the correct combination of items to create a device. Unlike games that might toss in a town and some shops and brand themselves an action-RPG, Musashi's plight is tethered to item management and key characters throughout the entire game. In this respect, it has shades of Metroid Prime, only progression is story- instead of puzzle-based.

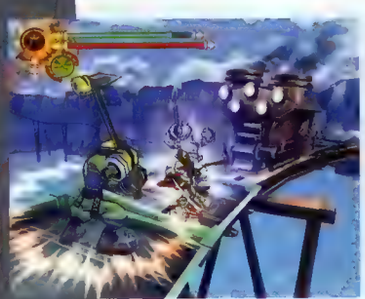
Hacking away at the game's inspired collection of Gandrake freaks (and they are in ample supply), rescuing maidens, and copying moves aside, Musashi keeps busy among the game's vast strongholds and enemy lairs—linked by flying and racing segues that'll give you Cloud Strife flashbacks—via platforming, exploration, brain teasers and some of the most epic boss battles ever. No one does bosses like Square, and they are in rare form here. The areas too, in traditional Japanese fashion, become successively more elaborate as the game presses on. The more irritated Gandrake gets as Musashi pierces his goon-laden island chain of inner sanctums, the more elaborate the gear works for each area become, along with the play mechanics and, of course, the graphics. Square's manga shader—which combines cel shading with pre-drawn shadows—has re-ignited my love for cel shading that died with Jet Set Radio and Jet Set Radio Future. If at first you're not blown away by Musashi's visuals, get a load of the texture work in the volcanic region and witness new life for what's become an overused and under-realized technique.

The best adventure games never stop evolving, provide ancillary hours of gameplay in and around the beaten path, and look fantastic doing it, and in that respect Musashi excels. In fact, Square Enix has nailed pretty much everything in here with the exception of a single fly doing a backstroke in the ointment called Musashi's English voiceover, which sounds like it was recorded for PBS Kids. It's one of those grating dubs that's so bad you're left with no other choice but to block it out completely. Thankfully he doesn't speak all that much and, playing in the background, the music is simply spectacular. Few game makers understand the power of a great score and almost none so much as Square Enix.

With impeccable world and character design, quirky cool real-time cinemas that pay homage to an era of gaming gone by, an outstanding opening movie and score, and compelling action-role playing for the duration, Musashi: Samurai Legend is a beacon of hope for a homogenized world. With the wonderful FullMetal Alchemist and this upon us, as well as Final Fantasy XII, Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children and Kingdom Hearts II yet to come, 2005 may go down as one of the most bountiful Square Enix years ever, and we need it now more than ever. Dave Halverson

"The best adventure games never stop evolving, provide ancillary hours of gameplay in and around the beaten path, and look fantastic doing it..."







Musashi: Samurai Legend **8.5**

PlayStation 2

+ Continuously evolving mechanics and story, awesome character designs, graphics and score.

– Easily one of the worst English voiceovers ever for a lead character.

Developer: Square Enix **Publisher:** Square Enix
Online: None **Available:** March

Review Gallery



Playboy: The Mansion

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Dev: Cyberlore/Arush **Pub:** Groove **Online:** None **Available:** January

6.5 Score

All our bitching about The Guy Game and Leisure Suit Larry: MCL was not in vain. Playboy: The Mansion manages to combine titillation and a funny, addicting publishing/build-an-empire sim without cashing in on undue sleaze. Best of all is putting together issues of the mag: hiring journalists, artists and photographers, and rubbing elbows (and a lot more) with celebs to nail that big interview or essay as you gather content. Shooting the girls (as in photography) is also handled very well, as are the mansion-building and just-toony-enough sexy bits—physics generously included. I don't wanna sound like a perv, but the first time I got the "Have sex on the couch?" command, well...all I can say is buy a couch early on; Hef likes to get his groove on. Dave Halverson

"Best of all is putting together issues of the mag: hiring journalists, artists and photographers."



Sega Classics Collection

PlayStation 2

Developer: [illegible]

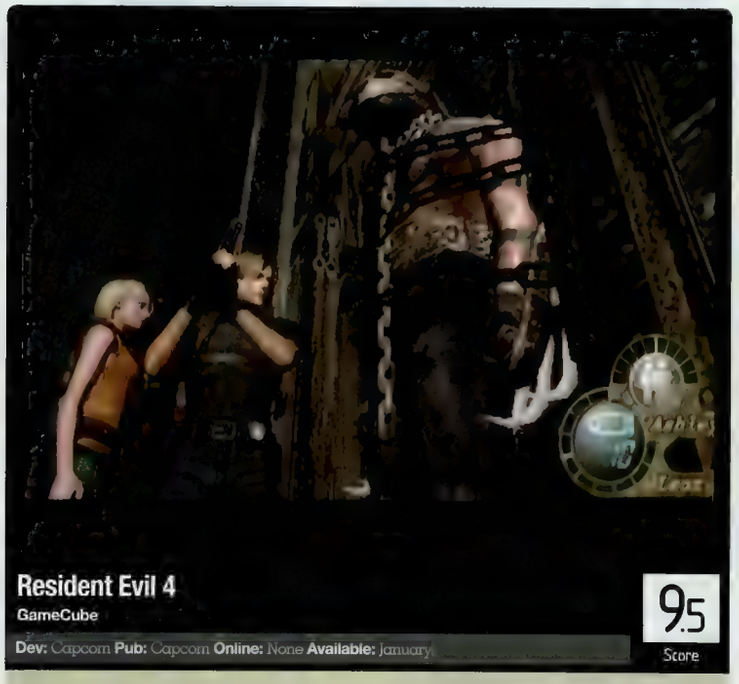
Publisher: Sega

Online: [illegible]

Available: February

5.5 Score

Take a bunch of great classic games, give them budget 3D makeovers, pack 'em all together at a value price and what do you get? Sega Classics Collection on PS2. This compilation, however, is a far cry from a true classics collection; these graphically deficient remakes only half-heartedly capture the greatness of the originals, often feeling like a cheap homage rather than true remakes. With that said, there's actually some fun to be had here. Games like Outrun and Virtua Racing hold up well, and co-op modes in titles such as Golden Axe certainly up the playability. There's a lot of challenging, old-school gameplay here; too bad it's mostly average when it could have been great. Chris Hoffman



Resident Evil 4

GameCube

Dev: Capcom **Pub:** Capcom **Online:** None **Available:** January

9.5 Score

Go ahead: complain about the lack of strafe, delayed weapon changes, brushes with stylistic excess and merely capable story. Now my turn: Resident Evil 4 is as close as games have yet to get to a true masterpiece—a towering achievement in artistic design, technical mastery and emotion-driven gamemaking. It's my favorite game since ICO. It's an experience that sticks with you, shows you things no other game has before, resides in conversation long after it ends. When you play it, you have to ask yourself why so much else exists as casual enjoyment, existing to safely entertain in a space where new, powerful experiences are obviously quite possible. Resident Evil 4 humbles everything I played last year. Brady Fiechter



Super Monkey Ball Deluxe

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Amusement Vision

Publisher: Sega

Online: [illegible]

Available: March

7.0 Score

Super Monkey Ball Deluxe is the definitive version of Sega's charming but challenging action/maze/puzzle game. Look past the sickeningly cute veneer and you'll find that SMBD is a showcase of superb level design, subtle physics, precision analog skill and nerve-wracking gameplay—Sega needs to get these guys working on a platformer ASAP. The presentation is also great, deftly incorporating levels from both previous Monkey Ball games and all-new stages seamlessly into the game's story mode. There is some undue frustration thanks to an uncontrollable camera, but this is still the Monkey Ball game to get. C. Hoffman



Star Fox Assault

GameCube

Dev: Namco **Pub:** Nintendo **Online:** None **Available:** February

8.0 Score

If a Miyamoto-produced Namco shooter sounds good to you, Assault should be the next game in your system after you recover from RE4. Returning the series to its shooting roots, Assault picks up the saga one year after McCloud's stint on Sauria and excels on pretty much every level. The ground-based action is varied and much deeper than expected (love the Landmaster and weapons toggle on the C-stick); the free-roaming and traditional 3D shooting is nostalgia honed to near-perfection; and by shooter standards, Assault is a marathon, weighing in at a robust 5-7 hours depending on which difficulty you choose. I miss Fox's awesome fur mapping, but I guess getting Krystal as a permanent team member makes us even. Dave Halverson



Red Ninja

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Dev: Tecmo **Pub:** VU Games **Online:** None **Available:** March

6.5 Score

Red Ninja does a lot right, especially when it comes to tethering Kurenei to the environment, as her feet match every slope in the game. I love the sexy taunts too, and the Tetsugen hook is one of the coolest appliances I've come across in some time. Thing is, the later stages of intricate wirework platforming will undoubtedly cause many undue stress, and Kurenei herself can be a challenge to control given her default dash and a hard-to-wrangle camera. She also has a slight hiccup in recovery time that tends to frustrate, and the game can't decide whether it wants to be action or stealth. Patience with Red Ninja does pay off, as there's a deeply rewarding experience underneath; it just takes a while to master its quirky undulations. DH



Mercenaries

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Dev: [illegible] **Pub:** [illegible] **Online:** None **Available:** January

8.5 Score

Ask and ye shall receive…who said that? Oh yeah, God. Well, I asked for GTA minus all the senseless urban slaughter, and just like the axiom says, here 'tis! We're a little late with this review, so it's no big surprise, but Mercenaries—aka GTA North Korea—is one fantastic game. Not that it's a total clone; in Mercenaries, you don't steal vehicles, you commandeer them (or have them delivered—your own personal air force included), there are destructible environments galore, shops that stock up as you complete contracts—you can even call in air strikes—and a deck of 52 high rankers to pick off on your way to the Ace of Spades for some between-mission target practice. Amazing visuals too, especially on Xbox and PC. Just try not to off any members of the press, m'kay? DH

"Well, I asked for GTA minus all the [illegible] and just like the axiom says, here 'tis!"



"I love the sexy taunts too, and the Tetsugen hook is one of the coolest appliances I've come across."



Preview

Call of Cthulhu
Dark Corners of the Earth

The Cthulhu mythos rises from the depths



There's a grim and unnerving element common to the darkest of H.P. Lovecraft's horror works: the displacement of safety and sanity. Heroes, once shining with valor, become possessed by sin. Innocent people in seemingly innocuous small towns are enveloped in unthinkable, otherworldly evil. Inevitably, such sinister themes make for great gaming horror. Bethesda's Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth, developed by Headfirst, is a first-person action-adventure that sheds conventions and clichés. There is no HUD whatsoever; you monitor your health and ammunition through more natural cues. Your wounds will bleed until bandaged, and your arm will begin to shake if you hold your aim for too long. And you'll experience all manner of Sanity conditions, from panic attacks to hallucinations and vertigo. This acutely sensory experience proceeds while a ghastly tale unfolds all around you. Below, Pete Hines of Bethesda Softworks parts the fog on this ambitious title. Mike Griffin

Call of Cthulhu
Dark Corners of the Earth
PC

Point of Interest
Lovecraft fans will dive into this dark horror.

Dev: Headfirst Productions **Pub:** Bethesda Softworks **Online:** None **Available:** April

Interview
Pete Hines, project manager, Bethesda Softworks

play: What era does Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth take place in, and what is the general state of protagonist Jack Walters?
Pete Hines: Call of Cthulhu takes place during the 1920s in and around Boston and a town called Innsmouth. As far as Jack's state, it takes a bit of context to describe. In the game's cinematic opening, you will witness Jack Walters, the player character, attempting to take his own life in a lunatic asylum, but the final outcome is not known. The plot then cuts to six years earlier with a fresh-faced Jack—blissfully unaware of the Mythos—investigating a disturbance at a house in Boston, Massachusetts that involves an unusual cult. Jack discovers something in the basement of that house not of this world, something that pushes him beyond the limits of both his understanding and mental balance. For the main game, we join Jack six years after that incident. No longer serving on the police force, he has set himself up as a private detective. It's early February 1922, a few weeks before the asylum suicide attempt. Diagnosed with severe amnesia and psychoses, he remembers nothing past entering the basement of that strange house in Boston, but is plagued by flashbacks, unworldly dreams and what can only be described as visions.

What brings Jack to Innsmouth?
A new client, one Arthur Anderson, asks him to visit Innsmouth, an ancient seaport in Massachusetts. A little research uncovers rumors of strange creatures and unholy rituals, of the town's unexplained prosperity and the recent disappearances of several people in the area. He takes a case involving the disappearance of a young grocery clerk called Brian Burnham. During the course of the game, the player will not only uncover the secret history of Innsmouth, but also gradually unveil the horrors of his own past.

Cthulhu uses a new custom engine. How is it suited to this game's brand of art design or specific environment effects?
With Dark Corners, many of our innovations have been gameplay-oriented rather than technology-oriented. At the same time, with a horror game that is pushing for new levels of realism, it was important that our graphics were of the highest possible standard. The reason for this is not just a good engine, but also the fact that our talented art team models the levels in [3D Studio] Max rather than using a rapid building editor linked to the engine. This allows for far more diversity in creating environments and reduces

the feeling of repetition common to a lot of other titles. Picking out a particular effect is tricky. The leaves blowing through the streets and settling in piles is really cool, and the rain/snow system is fantastic—both of them adding a lot of movement to locations. If I had to pick one, then I guess I would say the "being at sea" effect used on the boat: the boat pitches and rocks in the water, the rain splashes down on the player with the water droplets sliding down the screen, and when the tidal waves hit—yes, tidal waves—the player is tossed around and water is thrown over the sides.

This is a dark and unsettling world. What considerations were applied to the game's sound design process to help sustain the mood?
A lot of it is not just the use of ambient effects like you might expect, but also the use of insanity effects to further heighten the drama and action taking place. So running for your life and hearing the sound of your heavy breathing, coupled with the effect of hearing your own pulse pounding in your ears, is very effective.

What sort of gameplay can players expect in the campaign mode, insofar as structure and level progression?
We have designed the levels so that the player feels as if they are playing through the story as opposed to just being guided through it. Also, some levels are more open than others, so although the player has certain objectives that need to be met, the order that these need to be accomplished in is not fixed. Furthermore, there are some cool secrets and puzzles that are not essential to reaching the end of the game.

An important facet of Jack's adventure involves the Sanity system: What are some actual examples of Sanity in practice, and will there be fundamental gameplay changes while the effects persist?
The Sanity system uses audio and visual cues to let you know that Jack is suffering. There are a number of types, ranging from hearing your own heartbeat grow louder to screen blurs, having the screen go "swimmy" on you and so forth. These effects do impact Jack's ability to function, aim at things, etc. The only way to relieve them is to remove Jack from whatever situation is currently freaking him—and you—out. It's about trying to keep Jack sane and alive as he encounters increasingly more dangerous and frightening obstacles in his quest to uncover the truth.



You mustn't play in the toxic waste, children.

"During the course of the game, the player will not only uncover the secret history of Innsmouth, but also gradually unveil the horrors of his own past."

-Pete Hines, project manager, Bethesda Softworks

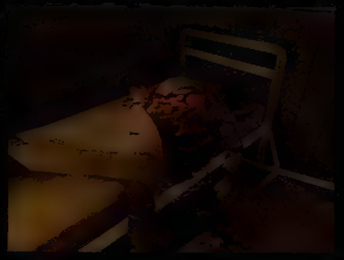




The way that monsters appear and behave can often make or break the atmosphere of a horror title. What sort of creatures and AI can players look forward to in Dark Corners?
What could be classified as the main cannon fodder of the game—not that there is such a concept in Dark Corners—is the tainted population of Innsmouth. The townsfolk appear to be suffering from some sort of disfiguring disease that seems to have plagued the town, with many tainted to a stage where their human characteristics are barely identifiable beneath scaling, discolored skin, bulging eyes and wide mouths. Those who have read the Shadow over Innsmouth story will be familiar with the secrets of the ancient seaport, and the reasons for this affliction. Initially the player will only encounter townsfolk that are suffering the early signs of the taint, but as the narrative unfolds, they will be exposed to the more terrifying, heavily tainted populous. As the secrets of the town are uncovered, the player will start encountering the Deep Ones, who are far more powerful frog-like creatures—fast, dangerous and merciless.

Will Cthulhu have any of the big, nasty Lovecraft beasts?
It wouldn't be a Lovecraft game without some *big* monsters. These include a Shoggoth, Father Dagon, Mother Hydra, Flying Polyps and a few other surprises lurking in dark corners. All of them are big…very big…and none of them pleasant.

Looking back: has the core vision of Cthulhu changed over the course of development?
No, I really don't think so. Headfirst set out to make a game that was true to the Cthulhu Mythos, while offering entertaining and engaging gameplay. Everything they've done has been to that end, and I think the game will provide a very unique and horrifying experience that is unlike anything you've ever played. **play**





Preview

The Matrix Online

The red pill increases in potency

We've been part of The Matrix Online universe for several months, traveling and fighting within the sprawling Mega City in the ongoing Beta test. And while the recent delay of the game was unfortunate for salivating fans not privy to the Beta, the extra few months of development will definitely turn those frowns upside down. Monolith has greatly improved the core technology driving the game, and thanks to a steady influx of testers—including Sega's own pro QA team—dozens of play mechanics have undergone the kind of balance overhauls that typically arrive in a content patch after months of player feedback on live servers. As we discovered in conversation with the game's creative director, Toby Ragaini, The Matrix Online is approaching prime time in better shape than ever.

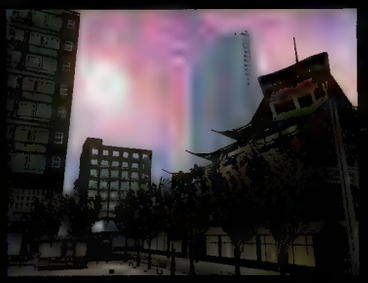
Although this is their first MMO, Monolith has years of experience developing engines with complex prediction code for online gaming. This team of engineers is now optimizing The Matrix Online's seamless outdoor-to-interior transitions. "Basically, the way that the game client manages memory is fairly sophisticated," Toby explains. "We have this really big urban world with lots of assets, and we use a pretty complex look-ahead scheme. How the engineers were using that memory is an area that we recognized we could improve." And with the addition of thousands of Beta testers, Monolith's networking crew has been observing traffic stress patterns and improving their servers accordingly at every step. The overriding goal is to methodically scale up capacity to handle a smooth retail launch.

Designing character classes and power sets is one of the most daunting tasks in MMO creation, especially in a game like The Matrix Online with its huge customizable ability tree—now further expanded. The extra months of large-scale Beta testing have been extremely beneficial to Toby and his team: "...because of the nature of MMOs, there are combinations of factors that you can't really expect to catch in a smaller formal test. Things like game mechanics and balance issues that would not be obvious otherwise. There is a whole department at Sega that is now helping us test the game." Which ability proved to be one of the most unbalancing culprits? "Characters with the Hacker Viruses in particular were in some ways overpowered," says Toby. And by tracing the advancement curve, they ascertained that players were acquiring other abilities a little sooner than the design had originally intended, and more adjustments were made. In turn, this allowed Monolith to increase the number of different characters and power levels that are available, and enhance the combat interface—all in direct response to massive testing efforts.

Although the launch delay of The Matrix Online was initially instituted to help smooth out the game for a multi-national release, neither Monolith nor Sega have missed the opportunity to add content and identify performance enhancements. MMO development is never easy, but it certainly helps when you have a set of committed Brothers—Warner and Wachowski—backing your every move. Mike Griffin









Machine guns, kung fu and clubbing: The Matrix nightlife is drop-dead stylish whether dancing around bullets or ballrooms.



> "...dozens of play mechanics have undergone the kind of balance overhauls that typically arrive in a content patch after months of player feedback on live servers."

The Matrix Online

PC

Point of Interest

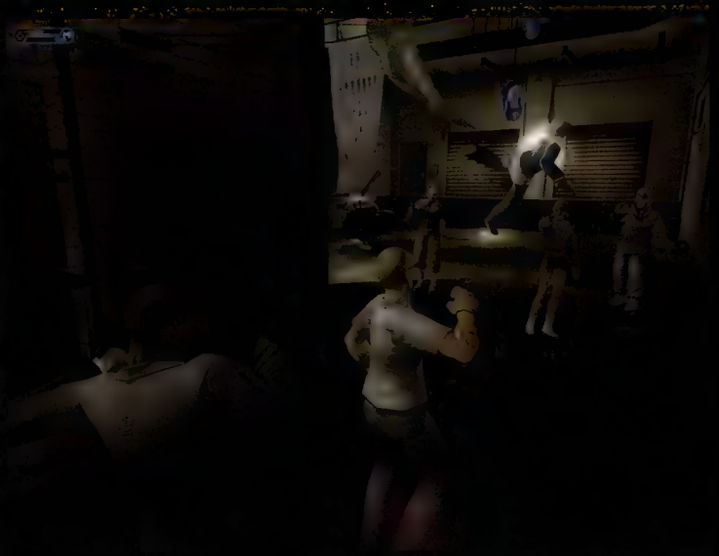
A huge backlog of mission updates will be ready at launch.

Dev: Monolith Productions **Pub:** Sega/Warner Interactive **Online:** MMO **Available:** May 2005

Preview

Second Sight

Surviving visions of eclectic action



While the narrative of games has certainly evolved in terms of breadth and complexity, it's rare to find a title with a genuinely intriguing and original plotline. Second Sight is one of those exceptional examples. The time-hopping tale of Dr. John Vattic brings to fore a series of *Butterfly Effect*-style notions of action and consequence, as he treks across different threads of a proposed reality that may or may not come to pass. It's all quite thought-provoking, bolstered by a satisfying denouement that elicits a few lingering questions as any decent psychological thriller should.

More importantly, the pacing of events is well constructed with regards to gameplay opportunities. As new predicaments arise, you are gradually introduced to more and more of John's powerful mental abilities: innate effects that allow him to manipulate physics objects and NPCs, heal himself and allies, coerce minds, spirit walk and unleash psychic blasts. The level design is solid and consistently well directed, avoiding any serious backtracking or mundane puzzles, and there's frequently room to stealth, snipe, psi-attack, or run and gun through any given situation. Free Radical's unique sense of art direction—saturated and exaggerated, yet atmospheric and with highly emotive characters—tempers the heady themes of this story.

Our preview version of Second Sight was playable from intro to end credits, and apart from a little cutscene voice sync problem (scheduled for repair before release), this looks to be a very good port. It has inherited some camera issues and slight control flaws from its console brethren as well, but this is nonetheless a fun hybrid action-adventure and currently one of a kind on PC. Mike Griffin

Second Sight

PC

Point of Interest

Second Sight features a constant mix of gunplay, psionics and stealth.

Dev: Free Radical **Pub:** Codemasters
Online: None **Available:** February

"Free Radical's unique sense of art direction... tempers the heady themes of this story."

Preview

Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich

It's time to save the world

The original Freedom Force quickly became a cult sensation when it was released in 2002. With its silver age comic book looks and storyline, and an awesome cast of slightly campy but totally appealing heroes, it was a comic fan's dream. It was also a damn good strategic RPG, irrespective of theme. Irrational is now preparing to unleash the sequel, Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich. This expansive time-traveling tactical RPG will showcase a new engine, new multiplayer modes and all-new heroes and villains.

FFvTR harnesses the Gamebryo engine, resulting in eminently more detailed environments than the original game, as well as superior lighting and a full range of physics—with cars being tossed around, street posts slamming into foes and buildings collapsing. The tactical combat system will be similar to the first game, but Irrational is buffing up the AI so your teammates carry out simple commands on their own; this means less micromanaging. The multiplayer game is being given proper focus in the sequel: regular and team Deathmatch, Base Destruction, Kill-the-Leader and Massacre—where you dispatch an endless stream of respawning foes. Editing tools will also be available for players to create their own deep campaigns with full storylines.

Expect a new cast of heroes including '40s rocket-armor-wearing Sky King, French hottie Tricolor and the undead Tombstone, who uses his Dancing Dead power to possess foes. The new cast of villains features Fortissimo, the flying tenor with a bombastic voice, Red Oktober, and the target of the heroes' primary objective, Blitzkrieg—leader of the Reich. Entropy, another new character, can phase in and out of reality. She begins to tamper with the time continuum. Suddenly the Nazis have rewritten history, winning World War II. Is Entropy somehow involved? Either way, Freedom Force cannot allow history to go down this path, so the heroes travel back in time to the '40s to take out the Reich. BLAM! We'll have more on Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich soon. Mike Griffin

Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich

PC

Point of Interest

Compared to the original, improved AI cuts down on micromanagement.

Dev: Irrational Games **Pub:** VU Games **Online:** Deathmatch, Massacre **Available:** March

"This expansive time-traveling tactical RPG will showcase a new engine, new multiplayer modes and all-new heroes and villains."





Postscript

FEAR Multiplayer: Intense Slow-Mo

Monolith and VU Games recently revealed more elements of their multiplayer plans for FEAR. Suffice it to say, the completely over-the-top close quarters combat looks amazing. Visually, the multiplayer game is teeming with explosive special effects, from wild sparks to shattered glass and smoke, with loads of environmental wreckage. Pointblank martial arts and bladed weapon attacks are dramatic and punishing, while a virtual armory consisting of dual-wield pistols, assault rifles, SMGs, a triple fire missile launcher and battle cannon fill each round with devastation. The developers have also included a nail gun, and yes, you can pin your victims to the wall like a ragdoll victory trophy. Besides the previously reported Deathmatch and Elimination modes—as well as team versions of each—Monolith is developing specific "slow-motion" modes. Players will build up a Slow-Mo meter for themselves or for their team, and when that meter is filled, they can execute a total world slow down (think bullet time) versus the opposition. The effect, in a frenzied multiplayer FPS setting, is absolutely incredible. Being that it's a very desirable power-up, the player holding the Slow-Mo will be indicated on a HUD radar and no doubt hunted down mercilessly.





Painkiller headlining CPL World Tour



Painkiller has been a huge hit for DreamCatcher, and now main character Daniel Garner is going on the road for an international million-dollar world tour with the Cyberathlete Professional League. Ironically, Painkiller's multiplayer game got off to a shaky start back in early 2004, but DC and People Can Fly were committed to seriously improving it. If you've played Painkiller or its Battle Out of Hell expansion online recently (highly recommended), you know that the game's multiplayer component is now very well-regarded in the genre.

The CPL has chosen Painkiller as its headlining competitive game (each first-prize worth $50,000) across every World Tour stop. The CPL also contracted Ritual Entertainment (Sin, Heavy Metal, Elite Force 2) to design three new one-on-one Painkiller maps for the competition. These maps, additional multiplayer maps and modes, new weapons, and an updated graphics engine featuring Shader Model 3.0 support are all available in the Painkiller 1.61 Update, gratis. It's time to practice your chain gun skills!





Ultimate Baseball Online prepares its pitch

Currently in open Beta and set for a launch around MLB spring training, Netamin's Ultimate Baseball Online is the first sports title to offer a console-like gameplay sports experience using a persistent online player character. Billed as a "Massively Multiplayer Online Sports Game," you will create your baseball player avatar and join live games online against other players in 3D stadiums. You play a field position, go up for bat...the works. The league tracks all stats in a huge database of categories, and for every play you execute, experience points will be awarded. You can then use these points to enhance aspects of your character: arm strength, quickness, catching range, stamina, body strength, throwing accuracy and speed. Players can even create their own teams and act as the manager, swapping in personnel. Essentially this is detailed, interactive fantasy baseball for the hardcore fan.





Lineage II adds nProtect GameGuard security

It's no secret that Lineage II has had its fair share of problems with "bots" and "farming." This is where players automate their characters in order to level-up or collect game currency, hands-free, on a 24-hour basis—frequently selling characters or currency on auction sites for real-world cash. It is a breach of the game's Terms of Service, and extremely disruptive for players. NCsoft has implemented the nProtect GameGuard technology across its servers in a serious move to curtail this exploitation and return the game to its intended design as an elite PvP experience. GameGuard detects several anomalies, such as leveling speeds, active play sessions and frequent large money transactions. If a character is flagged and found guilty (after three to four days of analysis), they are banned and blacklisted. NCsoft will continue to deliver free retail-size expansions to every Lineage II subscriber...and that's pretty cool. So everyone behave.

NPD PC Game Sales

Week of January 9 - January 15, 2005

01. Half-Life 2 - VU Games
02. World Of Warcraft - VU Games
03. The Sims 2 - EA
04. Lord of the Rings: Battle For Middle Earth - EA
05. Roller Coaster Tycoon 3 - Atari
06. Call of Duty - Activision
07. The Sims Deluxe - EA
08. Halo: Combat Evolved - Microsoft
09. Call of Duty: United Offensive Expansion Pack - Activision
10. MS Zoo Tycoon 2 - Microsoft

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Find out why 9 million people each month visit java.com, the ultimate marketplace for Java technology. Check back here each month for the latest Java software innovations, games and technology

Top Mobile Picks

Go to java.com for prices and compatibility



Tough Trucks

Climb into the driver's seat of an outrageous, pumped-up 4x4 truck and see if you can convert it into a real dirt track champion. Choose from one of three tricked-out trucks as you power your way around bumps, jumps and other competitors on multiple tracks. Satisfy your need for speed or your hunger for side-by-side paint swapping action! (Whiplash not included.)

Publisher: Airborne Entertainment



Cabela's Big Game Hunter

In Cabela's Big Game Hunter you'll choose one of several weapons as you explore multiple regions in search of big game and even bigger fun. Accomplish specific objectives or embark on a shorter trip. Either way, you'll need to manage your stamina and use stealth to bag the biggest trophies possible!

Publisher: Airborne Entertainment



Spider-Man™ vs. Doc Ock

Take on the role of Spider-Man in this ultimate mobile action-adventure game. You'll swing through the city facing your arch nemesis, Doc Ock.

Publisher: Sony Pictures Mobile

TM & (c) 2004 MARVEL and (c) 2004 CPII. All Rights Reserved. (c) 2004 Sony Pictures Digital Inc. All Rights Reserved.



Tony Hawk's Underground 2

Return to the underground with six new sick courses and infinite combos! Take on ramps from around the world with Tony Hawk and Bam Margera. Burn up the streets of Berlin and rail balconies in New Orleans during Mardi Gras! Snag items to complete mystery goals!

Publisher: JAMDAT Mobile



Attack Mission - Atlantic Harbour

Take to the skies for air-to-air and air-to-ground combat against the forces of a rogue scientist's rebel army. In Attack Mission - Atlantic Harbour you'll need to destroy the scientist's war machines and capture him. Watch out! Airships, bombers, fighters, warships and land-based forces are out to attack you!

Publisher: Blue Sphere Games Ltd.



The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

The final chapter in The Lord of the Rings trilogy will take you through daunting challenges and fierce battles for the survival of Middle-earth. Get ready to defeat enemies in eight different levels of the game!

Publisher: JAMDAT Mobile



JAMDAT SPORTS NBA 2005

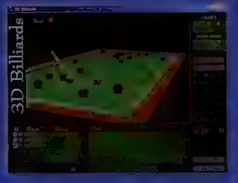
Slam, jam and drain the Three with JAMDAT SPORTS NBA 2005! Charge the Power Meter to Super Dunk, Alley Oop or Mega Block! Play 2-on-2 full court over a 7-, 15-, or 29-game season. Hit the court with your choice of 30 NBA teams for a chance to win the championship!

Publisher: JAMDAT Mobile

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Desktop Adventures





Snooker

Snooker, a desktop sports game, challenges your skill and strategy like no other. For both beginners and advanced players come show your sharpshooting skills and challenge players across the world. See if you can do the magical 147 break!

Publisher: Solware Information Technology, Ltd.



Boulder Dash®-Treasure Pleasure™

Boulder Dash-Treasure Pleasure is an addictive classic desktop game containing 22 tutorial levels as well as 60 game levels spread across three different graphic worlds, with ever-increasingly difficult levels. Includes many new and exciting tools and features—Reverse Gravity, Screen Rotation, post high scores to the Internet and more.

Publisher: Solware Information Technology, Ltd.

Tech Center

Warner Mobile Music Streaming Jukebox

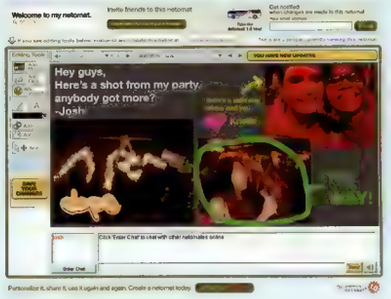


Take your favorite artist with you wherever you go! Warner Mobile Music Streaming Jukebox gives you access to ringtones, the ability to view and download artist images, the latest information and exclusive offers from your favorite artists, and more. You can even stream actual music clips on your mobile handset.

Publisher: Warner Music Group

Killer Desktop App

netomat



Easily create multimedia web pages for back-and-forth communication with friends, family and colleagues. You and your friends can add text, photos, files, drawings and chat—all in one place. It's FREE, easy and fun!

Publisher: netomat



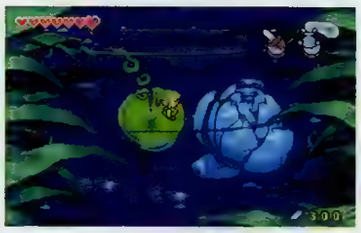
The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap

Game Boy Advance

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Nintendo **Available:** January **Multiplayer:** None

9.0 Score

The Legend of Zelda never disappoints, and this installment is no different: The Minish Cap is simply incredible. Although Link's new ability to shrink down to miniature size definitely gives the game a new twist, Nintendo and Capcom have pretty much stuck to the traditional 2D Zelda formula as far as the gameplay goes, providing another perfect blend of action, puzzles and exploration. As is par for the Zelda course, each new area is initially met by the joy of discovery, giving way to the pleasure of being confounded by its many mysteries, finally yielding to the satisfaction of solving its riddles and reaping its rewards. Of course, those wonderful tools—including several new



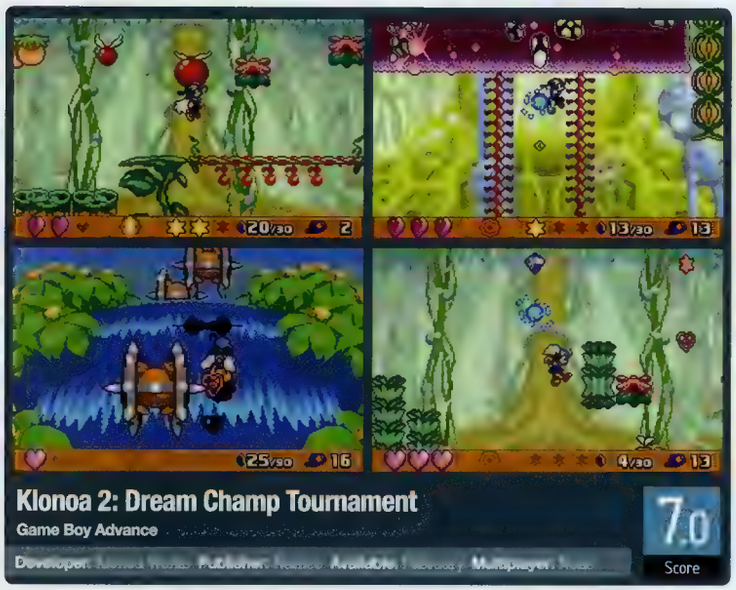


ones that add further innovation to an often-familiar formula—help Link to constantly evolve and open up new areas, and this cycle of exploration and discovery is further strengthened by the fusion of magical Kinstones with NPCs, unlocking even more secrets. One surprising aspect of Minish Cap is that there are fewer dungeons than the Zelda norm, but more emphasis has been placed on creating a compelling overworld that's rife with challenging obstacles and sidequests, resulting in better game balance overall. Only some minor design quirks, like some frustrating random elements and an item that can't be obtained until the game has been beaten, keep this game from perfection. Chris Hoffman





New tools like the Gust Jar update the Zelda formula.



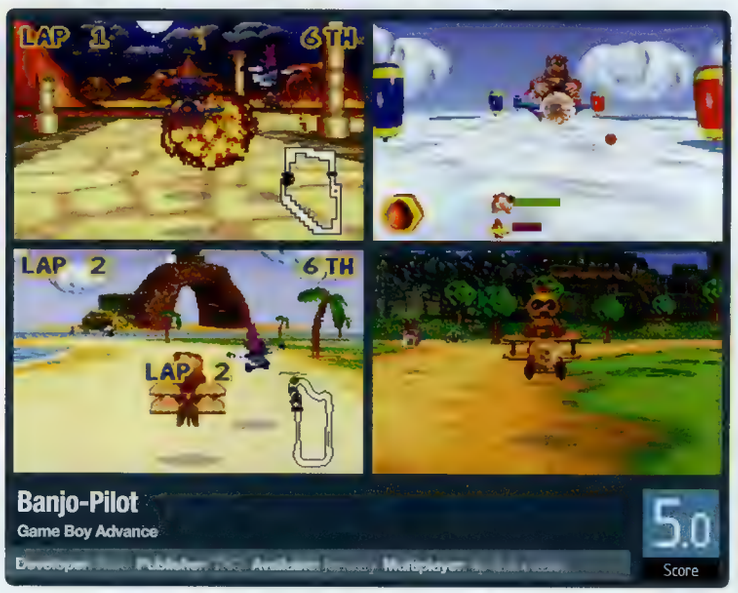
Klonoa 2: Dream Champ Tournament

Game Boy Advance

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Available:** January **Multiplayer:** None

7.0 Score

While I admit that I'd rather be playing a shiny, new 2.5-D Klonoa game on PSP or DS, the floppy-eared hero's long-overdue GBA sequel is a welcome sight nonetheless. Following in the footsteps of the first GBA game, Klonoa 2: Dream Champ Tournament combines the platforming action that Klonoa is best known for with a good amount of challenging puzzle solving and item collecting via some wonderfully designed stages that will put your mental prowess and finger dexterity to the test. The 3D boarding stages weren't as exciting as I'd hoped, but a fair number of other new elements (flowerpots in which Klonoa can plant enemies, for example) will keep even Klonoa vets intrigued. The boss battles earn points for uniqueness alone. Chris Hoffman



Banjo-Pilot

Game Boy Advance

Developer: Rare **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** January **Multiplayer:** None

5.0 Score

Banjo-Pilot looks good and handles well, but when it comes to the union of cart racing and flying, the game just doesn't gel. The courses seem designed with wheeled vehicles in mind, as there are no vertical walls at all, kind of eliminating the point of controlling flying craft. Other than the placement of power-ups and boost rings, BP barely takes the third dimension into account. Even stranger, if your pilot flies over water or rough terrain, it slows down your vehicle. If you can look past all that, you've got a good number of characters and courses, loads of unlockables and some fun link-up play, but then you'll still have to deal with cheap races that seem more determined by lucky power-ups than actual racing skill. Chris Hoffman

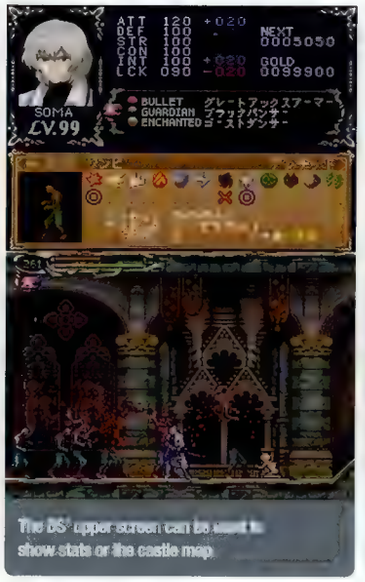


Castlevania for DS (working title)

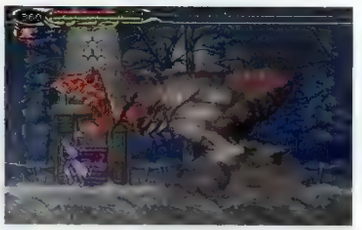
Nintendo DS

Preview

Developer: KCE Tokyo **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** Fall **Multiplayer:** Wireless item trading

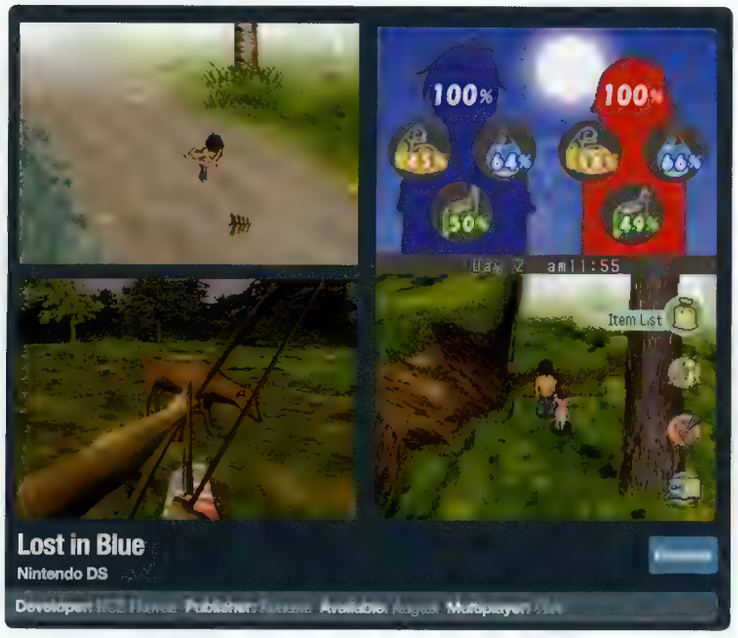


The DS' upper screen can be used to show stats or the castle map





The PSP may be most impressive thing to ever come near the handheld scene, but absolutely nothing on Sony's super-system has me as excited as Castlevania on Nintendo DS. This direct sequel to the brilliant Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow on GBA continues the story of protagonist Soma Cruz, who contains within him the reincarnated soul of Dracula—it seems a cult wants to kill him to bring about the birth of a new Dark Lord. But more importantly, it continues the action-RPG gameplay that has defined Castlevania since Symphony of the Night. Soma once again has a huge variety of weapons and soul abilities (such as summons) at his disposal, and as he explores the labyrinthine castle confines will again gain new abilities, some of which take unique advantage of the DS' capabilities, like a power-up that lets you tap the screen to destroy ice blocks. Visually, the game is on par with Symphony itself thanks to the 2D powers of the DS, and the gameplay appears to be even more laden with deadly traps and platforming elements. As expected, the bosses are horrific, huge and imposing (witness the behemoth in the screenshot!), and they can only be permanently defeated by learning and using Magic Seals—rune-like patterns drawn on the touchscreen that spell the bosses' ultimate demise. Castlevania is *the* killer app for the DS. Chris Hoffman



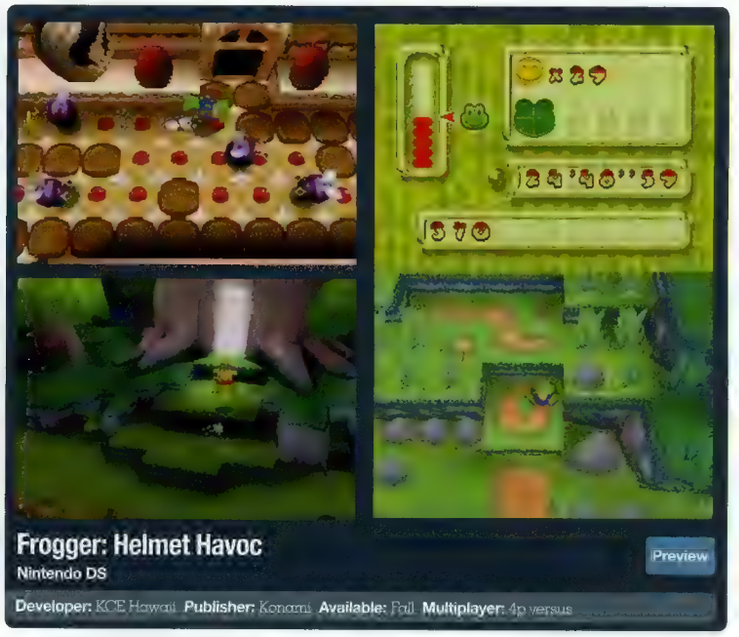
Lost in Blue

Nintendo DS

Preview

Developer: KCE Hawaii **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** August **Multiplayer:** N/A

A teenage boy and a teenage girl together on a tropical island…sounds kinda racy, except that they're shipwrecked, trapped, and without any food or shelter. Lost in Blue is what Konami has dubbed a "survival RPG," in which the main characters must work together to overcome their plight, scouring the island for useful items and exploring regions like ancient ruins and a live volcano. The DS' touchscreen will let players interact with items and engage in survival activities, such as building a fire or hunting animals, and after playing through the game as the male character, a second scenario is available where you play from the girl's point of view. Konami also promises multiple endings based on the characters' relationship, among other things. Chris Hoffman



Frogger: Helmet Havoc

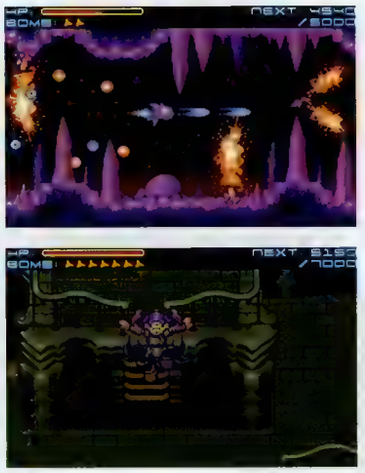
Nintendo DS

Preview

Developer: KCE Hawaii **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** Fall **Multiplayer:** 4p versus

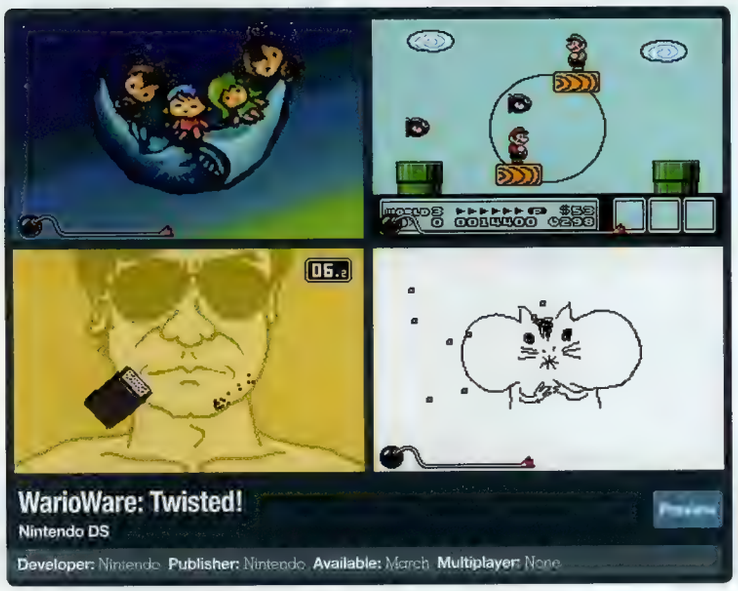
As with Frogger's recent console efforts, Helmet Havoc is a 3D action/puzzle game featuring one of gaming's most classic characters. The formula is familiar: hop about the levels in grid-like fashion, using your mind as well as your platforming skills to avoid enemies and obstacles (like those nasty crumbling platforms), tackling big ol' bosses and collecting coins along the way. Frogger does have some new skills to let him hang with the modern crowd, such as climbing walls and the ability to swing from poles using his tongue, plus multiple playable characters and those seemingly obligatory touchscreen minigames are included. And for the retro gamer in you, the original Frogger is available here as an unlockable bonus. Chris Hoffman



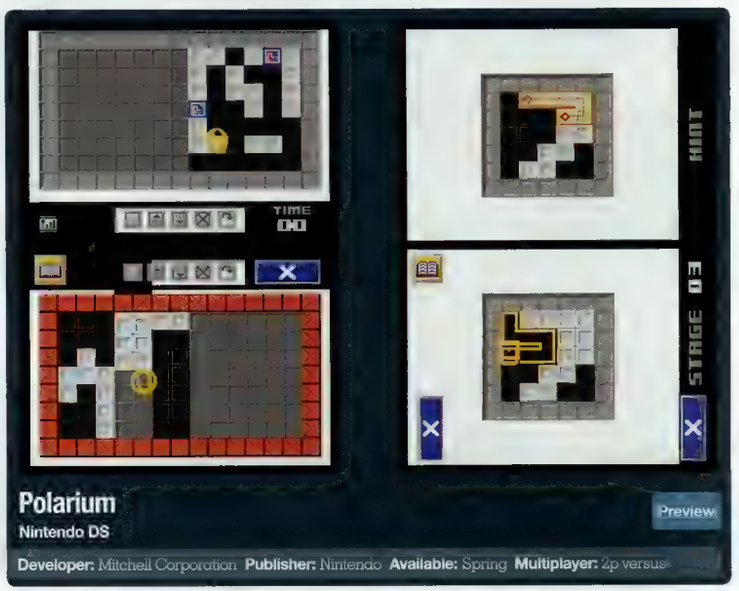


A shooter-action-RPG. It's such a great idea, you'd think that someone would have thought of it long before now…but let's just be glad that we're finally getting one in the form of Sigma Star Saga. The action in SSS is broken down into two components: on-foot exploration areas, in which players control Allied Earth Federation pilot Ian Recker, taking out occasional enemies with his handgun and other weapons, and side-view shooter stages, where the meat of the action takes place. As in a traditional shooter, your reflexes will be put to the test with barrages of bullets and enemy ships, but unlike the classics, this is where you'll gain experience and level up; even random encounters in the exploration areas will warp you into side-scrolling combat. During his quest to infiltrate the relentless Krill alien forces and learn the mystery behind six planets they have taken interest in, Ian will be joined by a few NPCs, including sultry Krill alien Psyme and a human female named Scarlet; he'll also find numerous gadgets to help him on his way, such as the Scanner, which lets players x-ray the floor to find hidden items, and more than 50 types of weapon data, which can be combined into various explosive configurations. It all adds up to one of the most promising original GBA games in ages. Chris Hoffman





"Twisted" isn't just a reference to the crazy cutscenes, zany characters and ludicrousness of the 200 microgames featured in the latest WarioWare; it's referring to the fact that the game cartridge contains a type of gyro-sensor that lets you play by actually rotating your GBA, so you'll, say, spin your GBA in a circle to quickly climb a flight of stairs—although some minigames just use the buttons, not the motion sensitivity. Pure silly fun ensues, with antics like shaving a beard, fighting off samurai, dodging baseballs, skewering shish-ka-bobs, entering a bathroom stall and, yes, more nose-picking. Score well enough and you'll unlock bonuses like interactive figurines (which you can view at different angles by moving the GBA) and musical tracks. Chris Hoffman



Like all great puzzle games, Polarium is based on the most simple of concepts: in this case, drawing a single line. The reason for drawing said line is to make a pattern of tiles turn from white to black or vice versa, thus creating solid rows and eliminating them from the playing field. Of course, what sounds simple in concept turns into brain-busting fun in the game's 100-level puzzle mode—featuring increasingly complex patterns that require careful scrutiny in order to change the polarity of the necessary tiles with just one continuous line. The game's Challenge Mode, meanwhile, ups the intensity with additional blocks continuing to fill the screen as you rush to eliminate rows. Polarium might not look like much, but puzzle fans should love it. Chris Hoffman

RACING GEARS ADVANCE

- [x] MISSED OIL SLICK
- [x] BRIDGE SHORT-CUT
- [x] COLLECTED MONEY
- [x] ACTIVATED CLOAK
- [] DODGED MISSILE



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One Missle, One Wipeout!



When slippery roads just aren't enough.



Speeding through the Shipyard!

"One of the best GBA racing games" - Nintendo Power

"BEST RACING GAME" - IGN E3-2004 Award

"The BEST GBA Racer we've ever played!" - PLAY Magazine



EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Violence

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GAME BOY ADVANCE SP

PSP

Preview Special

From its glorious high-res screen to its ingenious analog thumbstick, everything about Sony's PSP handheld game system screams cutting-edge. This is no kid's toy; it's what the world will recognize as an astounding piece of portable electronic equipment. With the March 24 release date just around the corner, publishers are lining up with amazing new games to show off the PSP's power. The titles on the following pages represent the games that may redefine the handheld experience during the PSP's launch window and the months to follow.





Coded Arms

Armed to the teeth for some cyberspace carnage

Developer: KCE Studios **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** Summer

Coded Arms' story includes no evil armies, no world-threatening schemes...just virtual reality gone amok in an abandoned military training supercomputer—which is as good an excuse as any to frag everything that moves. Blowing stuff up in first-person view is nothing new, but if there's one thing that Coded Arms is not, it's predictable. Every level in the game is randomly generated—and very nicely, I might add. The complex stage layouts feel perfectly natural, as if designed by hand, and as you can tell from the screenshots, no sacrifices were required on the visual front—these are easily some of the best PSP visuals yet. Another unique aspect is the large number of items in the game, including 30 weapons types and stat-boosting defensive equipment. Whatever the player discovers while delving into single-player mode can then be used in four-player wireless multiplayer battles, and confident cyber warriors can even wager their hard-earned items against their foes. Multiplayer maps are randomly generated as well, but if players find one they really like, they can save it for later use. Of course, the big question is how an FPS handles without dual-analog controls, and the answer is...it takes some getting used to. Fortunately, the buttons are fully customizable so players can have any control scheme they want within the constraints of the PSP, plus an aiming assist feature is currently being tweaked for maximum enjoyment. CH









MediEvil PSP

Sir Dan takes another stab at it

Developer: SCEE Cambridge Studios **Publisher:** TBA **Available:** March

After two kicks at the can trying to run from the shackles of their skeletal cash cow and resting place of Sir Dan Fortesque, MediEvil, SCEE's Cambridge Studios has waved the white flag and decided to make MediEvil games *only* from here on out. No, they're actually cooking up another masterpiece for console, but in the meantime have been gracious enough to retool MediEvil for play on the PSP.

For those who haven't had the pleasure of making Sir Dan's acquaintance, he's the bloke who ran like a coward from his nemesis, the evil sorcerer Zarok, after the first wave of arrows at the battle of Gallowmere, only to be called upon in death to do what he couldn't in life: kill the bastard. One-hundred years after the fact, Zarok is back, and has turned day to blackest night and raised an undead army to take over the world. In an effort to thwart the man, Sir Dan manages to rub up against every facet of good old adventure gaming as he unravels a series of Cambridge Studios' trademark riddle-addled worlds (18 to be exact) while searching for Rune Stones needed to open up the peril ahead.

Sir Dan wields everything from a club to Cloud Strife-sized swords in this mostly new take on one of the PlayStation's premiere franchises—back before anything with a jump button or without big guns became taboo—praised for its Tim Burton-esque worlds, Danny Elfman-like score, and some of the best undead satire this side of a Bruce Campbell marathon. Not to be outdone (or undone) for a lack of Wi-Fi functionality either, Cambridge has also designed eight extra-special MediEvil mini-games, none of which we've seen, but we're assured will be real crowd-pleasers. Dave Halverson











Infected

Planet Moon gives the PSP one nasty virus

Developer: Planet Moon **Publisher:** Majesco **Available:** Fall

Those mad dogs at Planet Moon (Giants, Armed & Dangerous) are at it again, mixing up their latest brew for the PSP. In either a stroke of genius, irony or mental illness, they've infused Infected's Wi-Fi multiplayer with the ability to transmit "disease" unto your online brethren when you obliterate them in modes like deathmatch and team deathmatch...and then track the infection rate. OK, so it's actually your personal avatar, but it's some crazy mojo nonetheless. Meanwhile, over at single-player HQ, the campaign gets underway when a virus attacks NYC just before Christmas, turning happy-go-lucky New Yorkers into *The Day After Tomorrow* extras. Your only defense, of course, is hitting the streets for some double-wielding shooting carnage—with a unique twist. As rookie cop Officer Stevens, one of the few people to avoid infection, you discover that your blood is the only thing that can stop the newly mutated populace, leading to the use of a "viral gun"—a firearm that draws blood straight from Stevens' arm and into the shells of the weapon. With a huge arsenal of viral weapons at hand, bloody mayhem ensues in a classic arcade-style fashion (the visuals are reminiscent of House of the Dead), as Stevens starts violently popping the diseased victims like freakish pimples, showering the streets with plasma and even calling in air strikes to make the city safe once again. And this is just the beginning: Majesco has signed on Planet Moon to work on two additional PSP titles as well. Dave Halverson & Chris Hoffman









"With a huge arsenal of viral weapons at hand, bloody mayhem ensues..."



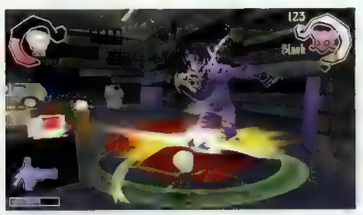
If DJ's scythe doesn't get you, his multitude of guns will.

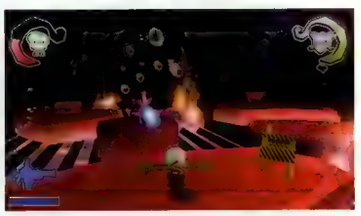
Death, Jr.

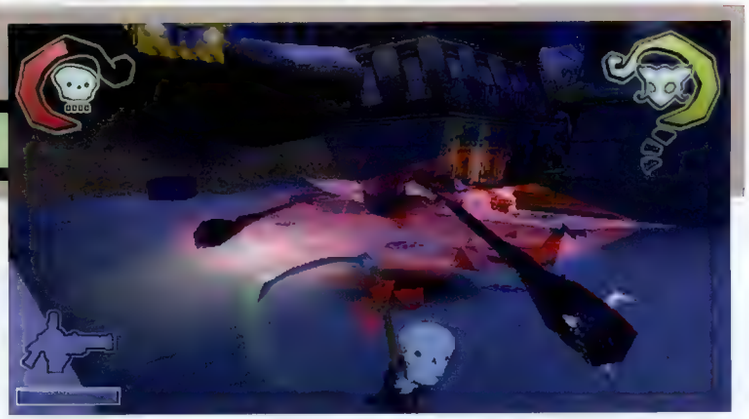
He's little, he's dead...he's got C4 hamsters

Developer: Backbone Entertainment **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** Spring

Death, Jr. was one of the first games announced for PSP, and now it's almost finally here—and surprisingly, Konami's publishing it, the company recently announced. This action-shooter-platformer stars the diminutive teenage son of Death as its main character—a cute little guy who likes to smite his foes with either a slice from his trademark scythe or just blow them away with various weapons, including twin pistols, a rocket launcher, an electricity gun, a shotgun, a flamethrower, a freeze gun, C4 hamsters (yes, you read that right) and more. Unlike most game heroes, Death, Jr. (or DJ, as he's also known) is only saving the world for personal reasons—it seems he let the evil demon Moloch (and all of his minions) out of a mysterious box while trying to impress Pandora, his obsessive-compulsive Goth could-be girlfriend (one of a number of freaky friends, including a limbless dude in a vat from Chernobyl), and now he's just trying to clean it all up before he gets grounded. To that end, DJ's scythe also doubles as a cool platforming device, allowing him to swing from poles, slide down wires, grab ledges and even pogo-jump. With a comic book arriving in April from Image and a feature film on the way, Death, Jr. is already primed for franchise status. Chris Hoffman







Interview

Chris Charla, executive producer, Backbone Entertainment

play: What kind of game design philosophy do you guys bring to the table? A lot of the focus of the company has been on handheld or 2D stuff, classics, and I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit.
Chris Charla: Definitely our focus has been—I think we've shipped more than 60 handheld games, Game Boy and Game Boy Advance games, plus a huge number of arcade conversions, and so we always try to take the philosophy of one of the original arcade games. The philosophy of those types of games was that you had to make that game engaging from the first second if you wanted to get another quarter, so we've always tried to get that. Like when we started talking about the technology that became...[Death, Jr.], our inspiration in some ways was Robotron, because it was a game where you're in constant jeopardy, and you constantly had to react or die, and so we've always had those kind of notions versus a game where you've got to collect or not advance, that type of thing.

Could you explain where the concept of Death, Jr. came from?
We were putting together some technology as a technology test bed, to go out and get jobs and that kind of thing, so we needed a game to develop with the technology... Our creative director, Mike Mika, went around and talked to all of the artists and said, "Come up with some characters, come up with some game ideas," and ended up with about 20 things, like everything you'd expect, from a female secret agent to a superhero to a big guy with an axe. And one of our artists, Pete Overstreet, just handed in this little drawing of this little dead kid, and it just said "Todd, the son of Death." No game description or anything. So when Mike went around to find out what everybody's vote was, what we should do, everybody was like, "This son of Death thing is hilarious!" And since we didn't feel constrained to try and make something that fit into some specific category, we just went with that, and as we showed it to different publishers, they were just really excited by it and we were encouraged to continue its development into Death, Jr.

Can you tell me more about DJ's friends? Where did you get the ideas for them?
All the ideas basically came from our concept artist. He drew a huge number of freaky kids to go with DJ, and we picked out a few of the coolest ones to form DJ's posse. One thing that doesn't come out as much in the game as it does in the comic though is that this isn't a world filled with freaks. Most of the kids at DJ's school are totally normal—it's just that the only people who can look past his surface issues are the freaky kids.

"...our inspiration in some ways was Robotron, because it was a game where you're in constant jeopardy..."

Will any of the friends be playable? If not, would you maybe save that for a sequel?
For this game, we really wanted to focus on DJ himself, but, of course, we definitely want to explore more about the other characters. Going forward, we'd definitely want to include more about his friends, but we haven't announced any sequel plans yet.

Since the scythe is such a cool weapon, why even have guns?
Well, our original concept of the game that became DJ was "Mario with guns," so guns were always part of the picture. As the game has progressed, I've gone from being a gun player to someone who just uses the scythe as much as possible. One of the neat things about the game is that it's tuned so that you can decide yourself how you want to progress—if you just want to use the scythe, no problem; there are strategies that will get you past most of the enemies with the scythe. If you use a lot of guns, again, there are strategies that will get you past most of the enemies. One of the really interesting things in watching people not on the team play the game is just seeing just how many different play styles it supports.

What was on your minds when you created the levels? Not necessarily the designs, but the concepts, like the playable level that was filled with cows. Is that, like, Heiferland or something?
It's called Meatworld! Where a Cow Becomes a Steak. It's a meat theme park, complete with rivers of fat, giant swinging turkey legs and lots of plastic cows to destroy. In terms of what was on our minds when we created it, I'm pretty sure it was lunch... The other levels are a little more mundane in name, but the geometry gets more and more twisted as you progress through them.

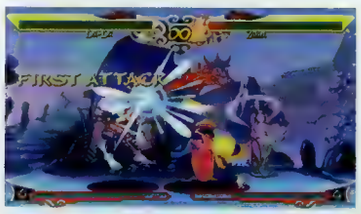
Finally, and most importantly, will you include, anywhere in the game, the line (cue Schwarzenegger accent): "Who is your daddy, and what does he do?"
Hahaha! We'd love to; we'll have to see what the lawyers say!

Darkstalkers Chronicle: The Chaos Tower

When the sun goes down, the Night Warriors come out

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Available:** March

The best 2D fighting this side of Street Fighter is making its way to PSP in the form of Darkstalkers Chronicle: The Chaos Tower. For the uninitiated, Darkstalkers takes the precise 2D fighting and intuitive special moves that Capcom is known for and gives it a fantastic horror edge, with 18 beautifully designed characters like Demitri the vampire, Lord Raptor the zombie, Morrigan the succubus, Anakaris the mummy and Felicia the cat-girl, all ready for battle with crazy fighting moves and accompanying gorgeous animation. Like the Japan-only Vampire Chronicle on Dreamcast, this edition of Darkstalkers includes every variation of each fighter from throughout the series' history, but the PSP version also includes the new Tower Mode, in addition to staples like arcade-style and versus play. Tower Mode lets players climb a branching ladder to the top of the tower, where achieving certain conditions in battle will grant access to new opponents and varied challenges (like having to fight a battle without special moves, for example). Conquering specific fights unlocks new content in the game's extensive gallery mode, which is bursting with artwork and other Darkstalkers niftiness. Also new to this version: Limit Battle mode, which assigns random handicaps to opponents in versus matches. A word of warning: this game may wear out your thumbs. Chris Hoffman













Ridge Racers

Ridge Racer fans will be in heaven

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Available:** March

The most thrilling handheld game I've ever played and a Ridge Racer fan's dream come true pretty much sums up Ridge Racers. Think of this as a mix CD of all the Ridge Racer games from the original up to Ridge Racer V with every track intact. And since I personally rate Ridge Racer course designs as the best there have ever been, you can imagine how much I like having them all in one place, especially when that place is the PSP. Graphically, the game is a knockout. It's not quite PS2, but it's close, and on the beautiful widescreen display, the visual impact is surprising. Add to this wireless multiplayer and a lot of racing challenges to undertake, and you have a Ridge Racer fan's wet dream. Michael Hobbs



Spider-Man 2

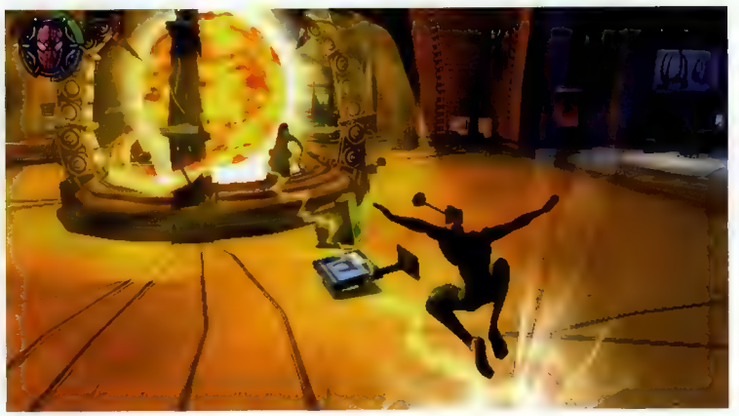
The wall-crawler swings his way onto another platform

Developer: Vicarious Visions **Publisher:** Activision **Available:** March

Apparently, doing whatever a spider can means crawling onto every game system imaginable, but we're certainly not complaining. As the title implies, Spider-Man 2 is based upon the movie of the same name, but as with its multiplatform brethren, the plot of the film has been greatly expanded, featuring comic book villains like Vulture, Rhino, Mysterio and Shocker in addition to film arch-foe Dr. Octopus. As you can tell by the screenshots, Vicarious Visions is taking advantage of the PSP's power, with some truly spectacular visuals providing a backdrop for the game's 19 levels. Naturally, all of Spidey's trademark moves will be re-created here—wall-crawling, web-yanking, wrapping up enemies and, of course, swinging through the Manhattan skyline—and all in full 3D at that: a first for a handheld Spider-Man game (no, the N-Gage's handful of 3D levels don't count). A few new moves are even being added specifically for the PSP version, including a cocoon move, a web net and a heavy web ball. This could very well be the best portable version of Spider-Man yet. Chris Hoffman





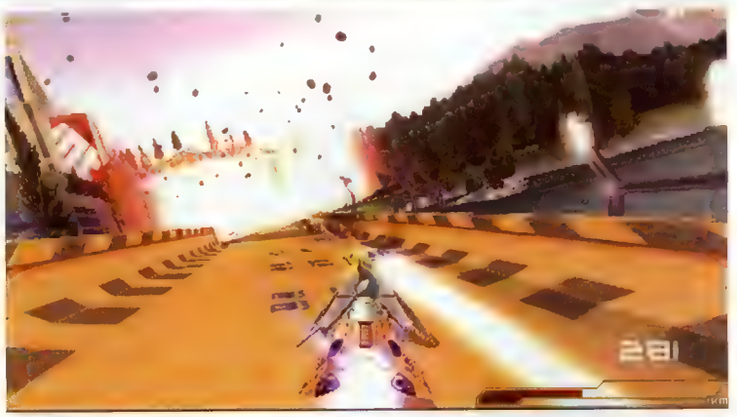


Wipeout Pure

An untainted return for the first name in futuristic racing

Developer: Liverpool Studios **Publisher:** Sony **Available:** Spring

If you're reading this, hopefully that means you're as excited as we are for this newest take on what was undeniably an instant classic on the once-fledgling PlayStation—a groundbreaking racing game that mixed Designer Republic's signature style with awesome futuristic settings. The series languished after the first sequel, but all that's about to change with Wipeout Pure. A generous 16 courses have been created, staying true to the unique aesthetic, speed and challenge the series has been known for, and seeing it all moving on the gorgeous PSP screen leaves a huge impact. You almost feel like you're experiencing the anti-gravity racing for the first time. And get this: now you get to race against seven human competitors through the wireless option, vying for new ships and even four classic tracks from the original game. For true fans of the series, this is just awesome. Brady Fiechter







Metal Gear Acid

A strategic new take on one of gaming's best series

Developer: KCE Japan **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** March

Metal Gear Ac!d redefines what we've come to expect from the Metal Gear franchise. While past MG games have concentrated more on the "action" part of "tactical espionage action," Ac!d is most certainly focused on the "tactical" part—this game is based solidly (no pun intended) in the realm of turn-based strategy, with actions dictated by cards as Solid Snake moves through the grid-based environment. Despite the severe changes in playing style, however, Ac!d still contains virtually all of the elements players have come to expect, including loads of weapons (handguns, machine guns, grenades, land mines, rocket launchers, etc.), knocking on walls to distract adversaries, and carefully monitoring guard positions to sneak past them undetected. Ac!d also adds new dimensions due to its turn-based system, such as allowing the player to set up chain attacks by, say, throwing out grenades, then shooting them for maximum destruction. Better yet, a second playable character, Teliko—a female agent sent in prior to Snake's infiltration—allows for deeper strategic possibilities, while Character Cards permit powerful summons by characters from past games, like the Ninja suddenly appearing to dice up opponents. Since this is Metal Gear, also prepare for a deep plot and a bizarre cast of enemy bosses. Plus, exclusively added to the North American version, players can go head-to-head in wireless versus play. Chris Hoffman



Snake can only use his machine gun if you have the card in your deck.





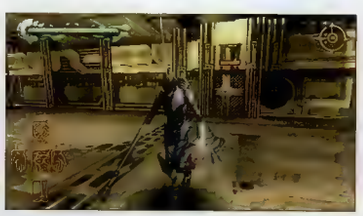


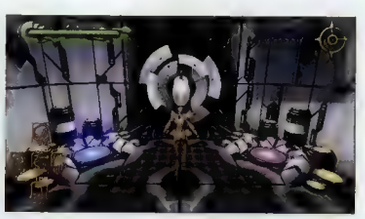
Rengoku: Tower of Purgatory

High art and futuristic combat

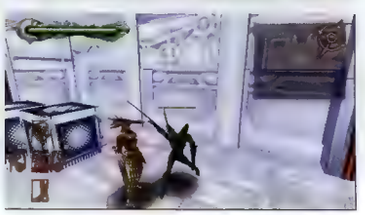
Developer: Hudson Soft **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** TBA 2005

Set in a bleak future dominated by humanoid robots, Rengoku puts players in control of one of these mighty androids, battling it out through a mysterious tower to face enemy 'bots and whatever else lies within. As players progress through the metallic corridors of the eight distinct areas of the tower, they'll come across numerous upgrades for their android's body (head, arms, legs, etc.), the most important of which are various weapons, such as swords or guns, that can then be attached at stations found throughout the facility. In several ways, Rengoku is similar to Konami's own Coded Arms, with features like randomized level design, four-player versus competition and some sharp, gritty graphics—which in this case are guided by the masterful art direction of Japanese sci-fi/fantasy illustrator Jun Suemi—but Rengoku offers a third-person melee-heavy alternative to Arms' FPS action. Slicing through enemies with bladed weapons is fairly satisfying thanks to the lock-on combat, and early indications point to a rather challenging game that will require a good amount of strategy. Chris Hoffman









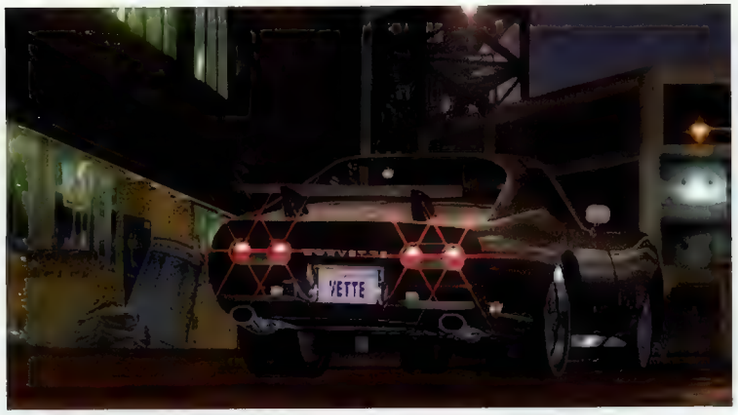
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition

You like illicit street racing? Join the club.

Developer: Rockstar Leeds **Publisher:** Rockstar **Available:** Spring

If you're a true automotive lifestyle aficionado, Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition is tailored especially for you, taking vehicle customization to the extreme, even teaming up with DUB Magazine to further tap into the core of the racing scene. Rockstar claims their attention to detail is unprecedented, with enough licensed cars and their respective tweakable parts to keep you glued for months. Well, months, that is, if the gameplay stacks up. MC3 will follow the console versions fairly closely, taking racing to the open cities like Atlanta, San Diego and Detroit. Once you feel comfortable with your ride—choose from the likes of SUVs, import tuners, choppers and tons more, all fully licensed—wireless support reigns king. Eight players can jump into the city at once, covering the same urban sprawls of the single-player competitions. Brady Fiechter







Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade

Will this multiplayer action-RPG be legendary?

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment **Publisher:** Sony Online Entertainment **Available:** March

Its name may be a bit unwieldy, but the role-playing action of Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade is primed to fill an important niche in the PSP's launch line-up. Players get to choose their character from four classes—knights, alchemists, druids or feral creatures known as Wildlings—each with distinct fighting and magical capabilities, then thoroughly customize them in both skills and appearance (no word on being able to choose gender though). As members of the Brotherhood, players will be joining together—up to four players simultaneously—to protect the city of Aven from the encroaching forces of evil, using their might and magic in real-time combat to fight through the diverse environments of the world of Unataca, collecting hundreds of types of items and equipment, and battling 150 types of enemies, including powerful boss creatures. As seems to be something of a trend in PSP games, Untold Legends will even boast randomly generated levels, providing a unique gameplay experience each time out. It smells a lot like a Diablo/Gauntlet clone, but Brotherhood of the Blade could end up as something much more. CH







The heroes and enemies ring with familiar fantasy tones.

Dynasty Warriors

Developer: Koei **Publisher:** Koei
Available: March

Like its console counterparts, Dynasty Warriors is filled with crazed hack 'n' slash action amidst a historical Chinese setting. A whopping 42 playable characters are included, and several enhancements are being made for the PSP version, including extra skills for support officers and smaller yet more strategic battlefields better suited for on-the-go gameplay. Unfortunately, the game only supports one player. CH




ATV Offroad Fury

Developer: Climax **Publisher:** Sony
Available: Spring

ATV Offroad Fury seems loaded to the hilt with features: 24 types of ATVs, 30 environments, and various terrain types including snow, mud, ice, water, grass and good ol' dirt. A career mode will be included along with race, freestyle, training and competition modes, and the game will support versus play for an as-yet-unrevealed number of players. Chris Hoffman




Need for Speed Underground Rivals

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** March

We're still not exactly sure what the "Rivals" in the title refers to, but we do know that NFSU brings the thrill of car modding and illegal street racing onto the PSP. EA promises tons of tuning options, 10 tracks exclusive to the PSP, more than 20 cars, eight game modes such as Nitrous Run and Rally Relay, and competition for up to four players. Chris Hoffman

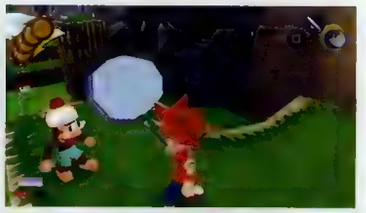
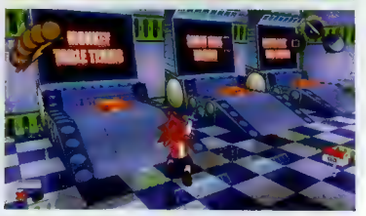




Ape Escape

Developer: SCEI **Publisher:** Sony
Available: Spring

Those wacky monkeys are causing more mischief once again, this time borrowing a time machine in an attempt to rewrite history and conquer the world, forcing protagonist Spike to give chase through eight worlds in an attempt to capture all 200 wild simians. Multiplayer competition and minigames are included, but we still worry about the lack of dual analog control. Chris Hoffman

FIFA Soccer

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** March

Modes like exhibition, four-player versus play and a standard season mode are expected in EA's FIFA series, but what's especially exciting about the game are its neat scenario modes. Mid-Season Scenario Mode puts players in the middle of the '04/'05 season with authentic stats and standings, while Challenge Mode lets players overcome pre-set match situations. Chris Hoffman




MVP Baseball

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** March

MVP Baseball seems to have the bases covered whether you're playing solo or with friends. Using the PSP's wireless link-up, two players can compete in standard exhibition play or batting/pitching challenges, or four players can compete in versus minigames. On the single-player front, the game offers a full season mode, enhanced by a new interface dubbed the "Pure Swing System." Chris Hoffman




Hot Shots Golf

You've never played portable golf like this

Developer: Clap Hanz **Publisher:** Sony **Available:** Summer

So Hot Shots Golf doesn't sound super-exciting, eh? That's what I thought till I sat down and got totally hooked—more so even than the infectious console version. The online matches are a blast, especially after you've built your personal character—a new customization mode allows you to tailor your clothing, clubs and several other areas while growing in skill through the ranks. This portable Hot Shots also offers six new courses, which look fantastic in their mini-form. Granted, the gameplay hasn't changed much—one button push sends the club, another push stops for the impact zone—but Hot Shots Golf is a newfound blast. Brady Fiechter



Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix

Developer: Shaba Games **Publisher:** Activision **Available:** Spring

You know the deal—it's the legendary Tony Hawk gameplay, only more twisted than ever. The PSP version offers four new levels—Atlanta, Kyoto, Las Vegas and Santa Cruz—for a total of 13 stages, plus 10 multiplayer modes, 25 characters and crazed levels of customization; players can even map their face right onto their character using a photo on a memory stick. Chris Hoffman





Twisted Metal: Head-On

Developer: Incog/Sony Santa Monica **Publisher:** Sony **Available:** Spring

Twisted Metal was one of the first breakout games on the original PlayStation, so it's only fitting that its brand of vehicular combat will help launch PSP as well. Players can choose from 14 instruments of destruction, then blast away with missiles, machine guns and special attacks in the game's 12 arenas, either alone or with up to eight players.Chris Hoffman





NBA 2000

Developer: 989 Sports **Publisher:** Sony **Available:** Spring

While EA should have players covered who want to kick it street style, for traditional b-ball, you'll want to look for Sony's NBA 2005. This full-blown basketball sim has pretty much everything you'd expect on console: Play Off Mode, Practice Mode, minigame competitions, two-player versus play, Season Mode…complete with nuances like player trades, injuries and free agents. Chris Hoffman





NFL Street 2: Unleashed

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** March

Yeah, it's Street—real NFL players throw away the rules to rumble in backyard arenas, and it's a blast. The new deal here is quite a few PSP-exclusive mini-events, like party play and street events including street slalom, style standoff and style point challenge. More later on the Pocket TRAX addition, which acts as sort of a virtual MP3 player. Brady Fiechter



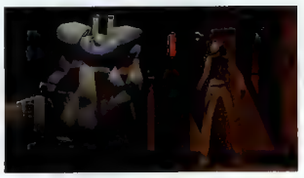


Advent Shadow

From the shadows of Advent Rising it emerges

Developer: Full Fat **Publisher:** Majesco **Available:** TBA 2005

Running parallel to the events of Advent Rising, Advent Shadow chronicles the plight of ace pilot Marin Steele. From the point she runs into and is ultimately separated from Advent Rising's Gideon Wyeth, her PSP trek begins, and with it a slew of tasty PSP features like high-speed chases, aerial combat, tank battles, dishing out her newly discovered powers, and plenty of platforming. Hopefully these rather chunky early screens are indicative of a first pass at the graphics. If nothing else, the soundtrack will be a religious experience, seeing how it's being performed by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the LA Symphony. Dave Halverson



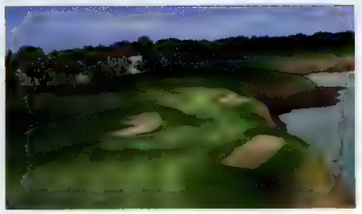


Tiger Woods PGA Tour

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** March

Everything you'd expect from this stellar golf franchise is here: create-a-player, experience tracker, wide assortment of real courses and golfers, a career mode to show and grow your dominance. In what's proving to be a theme for the PSP, Tiger Woods PGA Tour takes on a new dimension through wireless multiplayer matches. Brady Fiechter





NBA Street: Showdown

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** March

Before there was NFL Street, there was the original and still the best arcade-style sports game out there, NBA Street. A big part of the fun in Street has always been creating a character by honing your skills in the many challenge zones, and Showdown continues the tradition with a few new additions, Shot Block and Arcade Shootout. There's also a four-player party mode. Brady Fiechter





FIFA Street

So what's next? NHL Street? MLB Street? I know, NASCAR Street! **review**

It was bound to happen. EA Sports Big couldn't leave well enough alone, and now they've taken soccer to the streets. I shouldn't sound so negative—this isn't a bad game. It follows EA's proven Street formula and it works. Although it's far from perfect, for a first effort, the game's worth checking out.

Just like the other Street titles, the teams have been slimmed down a bit (down to four per side from 11) to compensate for the frenetic action usually associated with these types of titles. Being a FIFA licensed game, players can choose from all of the major teams around the world. Being 4-on-4, you'll get to play with the best of the best soccer players—which makes for some heated and exciting matches.

Players will spend most of their time with Rule the Street mode. Granted, this mode is typical Street fare—create a player, build a team and compete against other teams for street cred—but the formula works. However, this mode would've been a lot more enjoyable if it weren't for the idiotic AI. Quite frankly, it's downright painful. Why do teammates pass the ball right back to you when they're standing in front of the opponent's goal? Also, why do the goalies step so far out from the goal—leaving it fully exposed for an easy kick in? Quite often during gameplay, you'll feel like you're the only one playing. Your teammates are often found standing around and not initiating any sort of defensive or offensive plan. Exasperating? You better believe it. And speaking of which, good luck executing a GameBreaker in FIFA Street. Most of the time, your own teammates will get in the way of your shot on goal. Tragic.

On the flipside, the game does a good job of presenting street-style soccer. From the casual uniforms to the urban locations, you definitely get the vibe this is not your typical soccer game. The amount of customization on your player and team is also very good.

Despite its flaws, FIFA Street shows great potential. I think overall, the game works, and at times, it truly excites. Being a huge soccer fan, I really wanted this game to rock, but in the end it shot down my enthusiasm. Tom Ham

FIFA Street **6.0**

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

+ Nice visuals and probably the best soundtrack for any EA Sports game.

- The AI needs a lot of work; the announcer is annoying and no online play.

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Online:** None **Available:** February







"From the casual uniforms to the urban locations, you definitely get the vibe this is not your typical soccer game."







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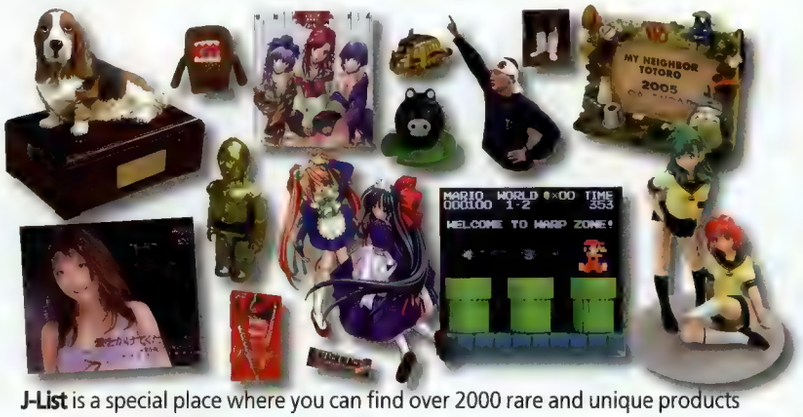
Completely Confident in my Sexual Prowess. For those who want to strut their stuff, we recommend this wacky T-shirt. Pronounced *Zetsurin Power*, with this shirt on, there's no telling what will happen.



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anime 2004
year in review

As another fantastic year for anime fades into lore, we find ourselves pondering whether or not anime in the U.S. has finally peaked. Taking into account that Saturday mornings are pretty much wall-to-wall anime in neutered form, along with Adult Swim's edited stream, ADV's growing Anime Network and the continued limited success of home DVD and films like *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, *Appleseed* and anything Miyazaki...maybe that's a wrap. I mean, we have *Puffy AmiYumi* and *Super Milk Chan* on cable; that's progress.

Perhaps anime will never attain "mainstream" status, which is fine by me. I thought Production I.G's work in *Kill Bill* would start a revolution, or maybe *Dead Leaves*, but alas, we remain directly in the spotlight but somehow just off to the side—perhaps the best place to be. The notion that works like *Dead Leaves*, *Kill Bill* or *Samurai Champloo* are so superior to just about anything in any medium today that the world is bound to latch onto is now fading, replaced by the realization that, as a result, anime will likely remain untainted and continue to expand our minds. Looking at what's happened to games in this country, you realize that with mainstream acceptance comes more American flavor, and I'd rather eat day-old sushi.


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BLAME!

Ver.0.11 : Salvaged disc by Cibo



2004 ANIME TOP 25

Twenty-five ways Japan broke the cool barrier

25



The Super Milk Chan Show

ADV Films

And finally, let us not forget the snot-nosed, drooling, potty-mouthed, superpowerless superhero and her whining obsolete robot, slimy slug with a drinking problem, and mechanical dog that pees on everything. Working alongside the president of everything, we can all sleep better at night knowing that Milk is on the job.

24



New Fist of the North Star

ADV Films

After all these years, who knew that watching Kenshiro poke holes in post-apocalyptic a-holes could still be so much fun? While the formula of über-protector-come-king-of-the-world turning trash-talkers into plasma gushers remains a simplistic overall device, who knew Kenshiro had a personality, let alone could drive a mean dune buggy? Talk about a revelation...

23

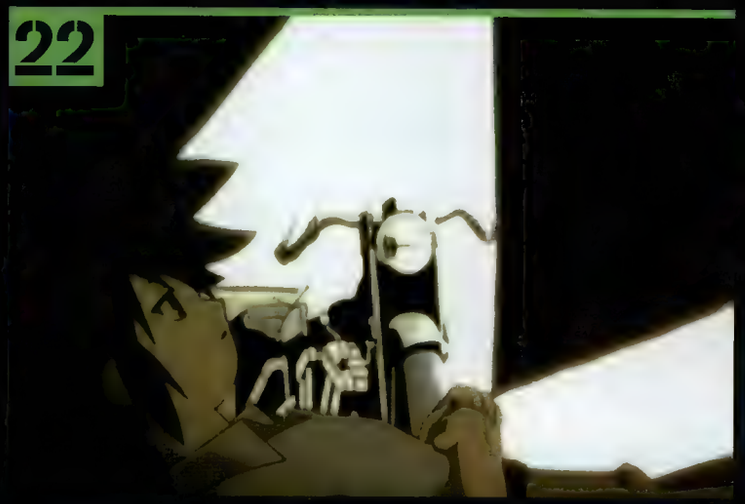


Miami Guns

Anime Nation

2004's guilty pleasure came in the hourglass shape of two of Miami's finest—Yao & Lu—in all of their bouncy glory. Packed with parodies, homages galore, foolhardy pranks and enough fan service to blow you over, *Miami Guns* wore its bra and panties proudly on its head.

22



Kino's Journey

ADV Films

Looks are particularly deceiving in the case of *Kino's Journey*, as what looks to be based in reality is actually anything but. If figuring out whether Kino is a boy or girl doesn't keep you guessing, trying to wrap your brain around his (or her) relationship with his (or her) talking motorcycle will...and that's before they reach any number of *Twilight Zone*-like destinations that lead them down a myriad of peculiar paths.

21



DoKKoiDa!?

Geneon Entertainment

What's funnier than a pint sized rent-a-hero in a diaper-endowed robo-suit? Not much! But take a whole squad of wacky criminals that all want to squash him, who all happen to live in the same apt. building but don't know it and, well, that's really funny. Add an interstellar hoodwink who pulls the puppet strings with the finesse of a bowlegged cow and the result is a rare superhero parody that actually works without insulting its source material.

20



Lady Death

ADV Films

For being ADV Films' first original animated feature, *Lady Death: The Motion Picture* delivered as promised a straightforward tale of revenge as hell's sexiest pale rider paid daddy back with interest for her betrayal, torment and ultimate damnation. In other words, fun for the whole family. Though seemingly cobbled together in places, *Lady Death* has an allure all its own.

19

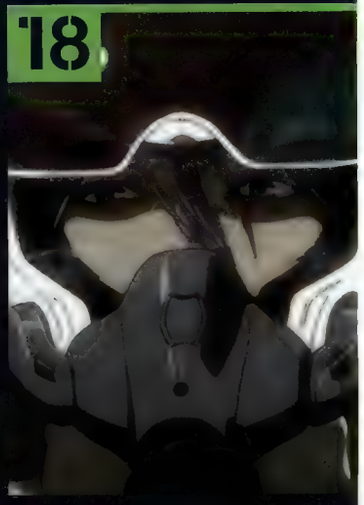


GAD Guard

Geneon Entertainment

With mecha tales now less than a dime a dozen, within a fractured society where electricity is a luxury, Gonzo has managed to inject a good measure of newness into the kind, housing its uniquely modeled behemoths called Techodes into small magical cubes (GADs) that spiritually bond with their human counterparts. An addicting, technique-laden, altogether fascinating show, *GAD Guard* breathed some new life into mecha kind.

18



Yukikaze

Bandai Entertainment

As anyone who's watched can surely attest, the thought you're left with after viewing *Yukikaze* is "more please." Unfortunately, however, this breathtaking CG/anime explosion, about a hole in the dimensional gate over Antarctica where mankind is making its last stand against an invading alien force, stands alone—even though it wears a "Volume 1" in the title. With any luck, Gonzo will finish what they've so impressively started in the not-so-distant future.

17



Tsukihime

Geneon Entertainment

The ability to see the threads of life is one thing, but running your blade through them and in the process dicing a vampire princess into bite-sized chunks is quite another, as young Shiki is about to find out, among many other astonishing things within this mesmerizing, fresh take on modern vampirism.

16



Ninja Scroll

Urban Vision

Yoshiaki Kawajiri/Madhouse's long-awaited, much-anticipated TV series based on the exploits of their Zen über-ninja Jubei Kibagami delivered exactly as expected: three volumes packed with wall-to-wall action, adventure and demon slaying, delivered with tongue-in-cheek humor and buckets of blood.

15



The Daichis
Earth's Defense Family

Geneon Entertainment

Having absolutely no expectations for *The Daichis: EDF*, I can't remember the last time something flew in under the radar this good. '03's *Space Pirate Mito* was an unexpected pleasure, but *EDF* ranks among the most endearing dysfunctional-family-oriented shows of the bunch. Bittersweet, funny, and action-packed all at the same time, it was also one of the best-animated and polished new series of the year.

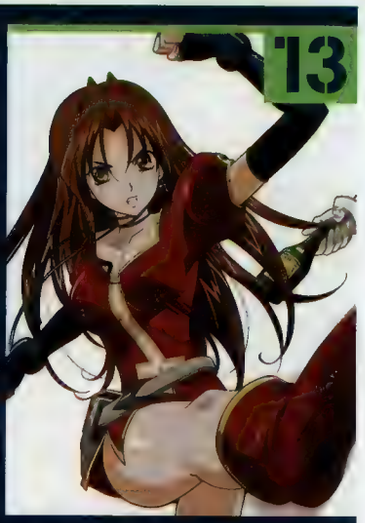
14



Gungrave
Geneon Entertainment

The story of how Brandon Heat became the undead purveyor of pain Beyond the Grave—together with a pair of heavy metal pistols called CERUBERUS—is told here in its dramatic entirety, which takes us on a journey of friendship, betrayal, love, murder and post-mortem revenge, with a big, fat exclamation point on pain.

13



Kiddy Grade
FUNimation

Not that there's anything wrong with super foxes in outer space—*Kiddy Grade* offered more than the usual tirade of fan service that often accompanies superhero hotties by surrounding its sexy heroines with a healthy dose of compelling sci-fi. Lumiere still creeps us out, but this is one cool series.

12



Tokyo Godfathers
Columbia Tristar

Satoshi Kohn's heart-wrenching story about a homeless trio's trek to return an abandoned baby to its mother's arms on Christmas Eve—brought to stunning animated life in league with the best in all of animation—*Tokyo Godfathers* never really leaves you.

11



Requiem from the Darkness
Geneon Entertainment

What *Requiem* lacks in animation quality it more than makes up for in macabre style and metaphorical comeuppance. Through the eyes of a young author, death always gets the last laugh, which, given the nature of its three merchants, has never been so entertaining.

10



Chrono Crusade
ADV Films

Continuing the mysticism and religious archetypes that captivated us in the likes of *Hellsing* and *Witch Hunter Robin*, *Chrono Crusade* does so with an air of the absurd—borderline sacrilege even—as the ultimate good and evil work together to thwart—what else—rampant demons! Sister, meet Devil; Devil, Sister... Cue the jazz.

09



Gundam SEED

Bandai Entertainment

Apparently there's no such thing as too much of a good thing, because for as long as anime has been significant in the U.S., *Mobile Suit Gundam* has been a major component of it, and somehow Sunrise keeps making it better. After *The 08th MS Team*, we were ready to call it a millennium when along comes *Seed* and a stack of new manga to suck us right back in.

08



Mezzo: Danger Service Agency

ADV Films

Mikura Suzuki's series debut suffuses the energy and stylish gunplay of the 2001 OVA *Mezzo Forte* (and then some) without all the steamy (and oh-so-graphic) sex. The stunningly colored and animated show about a trio of vigilantes for hire stood out as the year's best crime-busting serial, while dishing out some of the best eye candy ever for a TV series.

07



R.O.D the TV

Geneon Entertainment

Bookish yet fantastical, somber yet funny, and at times brutal, one thing *R.O.D the TV* is not is boring or predictable, and every time The Papers use their power over parchment to beat down evil, it's simply a blast. It has its odd undulations, but on the whole, *R.O.D* is on par with its much-beloved predecessor.

06



Azumanga Daioh

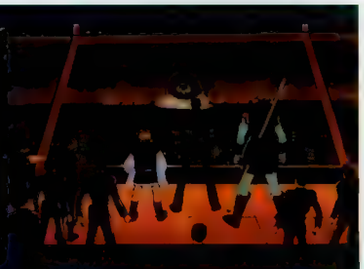
ADV Films

…Is what you get when you mix a 10-year-old child prodigy with a class of high school students being taught by a teacher who is, to say the least, unconventional. Delivered in manga-sized spurts that deliver big laughs, *Azumanga Daioh* treads on familiar ground but resonates like *Seinfeld* for anime fans.

05







Giant Robo

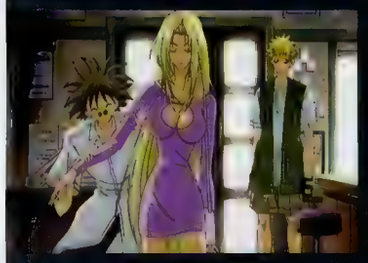
Media Blasters

Incredible animation accompanies the story of Daisaku Kusama and the giant robot he commands to deliver us from chaos. Shades of *Gigantor* made GR one of the most compelling series of the '90s, and its DVD debut (took long enough) is packed with extras and one of the coolest DVD shells ever. Just look for the one that looks like a big eye staring back at you.





"Shades of *Gigantor* made GR one of the most compelling series of the '90s."





Get Backers

ADV Films

How can a show about a pair of hooligans that retrieve lost or stolen items be so damn compelling? Easy... super powers, super villains and super vixens. The coolest duo since Chest Rockwell and Brock Landers play up their conflicting chemistry like a sci-fi *Starsky and Hutch*. *Get Backers* was the surprise of '04.





"...like a sci-fi *Starsky and Hutch*, *Get Backers* was the surprise of '04."

04



03



Paranoia Agent

Geneon Entertainment

The enlightenment of Satoshi Kohn's social commentary, which we're used to getting through inspired singular works such as *Perfect Blue*, *Millennium Actress* and *Tokyo Godfathers*, continues to be the transcendental force in dramatic anime. Receiving his latest metaphor for an age in series form is a rare gift.

"The enlightenment of Satoshi Kohn's social commentary...continues to be the transcendental force in dramatic anime."





02



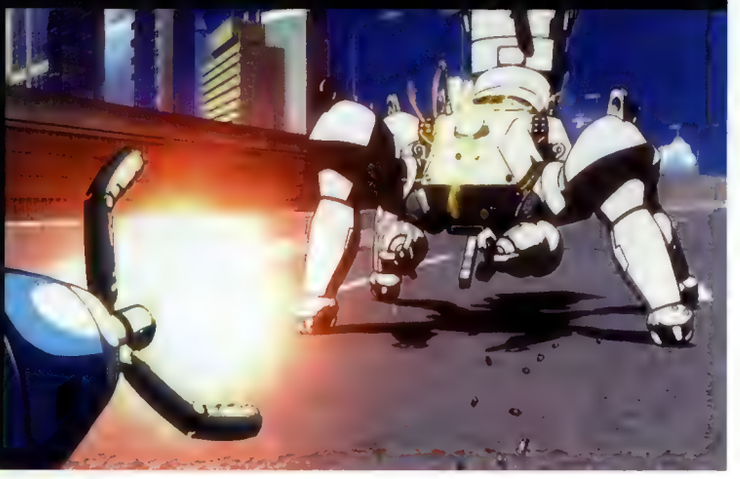
Ghost in the Shell

Stand Alone Complex

Bandai Entertainment/Manga Video

After leaving us hanging for nearly a decade, Production I.G and the *Ghost in the Shell* Committee swung open the doors, and case files, of Section 9 with a series as visually striking as it is thought provoking. A great new PS2 game, feature film and special edition capped off a year that saw Masamune Shirow's epic finally reach its full potential.

"...a series as visually striking as it is thought provoking."



01



Dead Leaves

Manga Video

Like visual crazy glue, *Dead Leaves* launched us into its twisted reality where it was all we could do to hang on and mentally process the mayhem. The animation is otherworldly, and the attitude simply on another plane of existence. There's only one, but there's nothing else like it, and it will never grow old.

"...it was all we could do to hang on and mentally process the mayhem."

SCRAPPED PRINCESS

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2004 ANIME CATEGORY WINNERS

Credit where credit is due

Best Action/Adventure

Get Backers
ADV Films



Nominees
- Get Backers
- Mezzo: Danger Service Agency
- New Fist of the North Star
- Ninja Scroll TV

Best Sci-Fi

Ghost in the Shell
Stand Alone Complex
Bandai Entertainment/Manga Video



Nominees
- Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
- Dead Leaves
- GAD Guard
- The Daichis: Earth's Defense Family

Best Drama

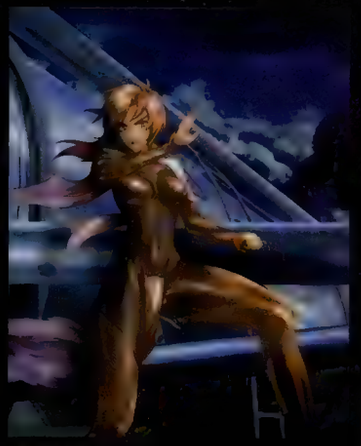
Paranoia Agent
Geneon Entertainment



Nominees
- Kino's Journey
- Texhnolyze
- Paranoia Agent
- Gungrave

Best New Series

Ghost in the Shell
Stand Alone Complex
Bandai Entertainment/Manga Video



Nominees
- Get Backers
- Kiddy Grade
- R.O.D the TV
- Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex

Best Mecha

Giant Robo
Media Blasters



Nominees
- Gad Guard
- Gundam SEED
- The Big O II
- Giant Robo

Best Fantasy

R.O.D the TV
Geneon Entertainment



Nominees
- R.O.D The TV
- Aquarian Age
- DNangel
- Chrono Crusade

Best Video Game-based

Legend of the Mystical Ninja
ADV Films



Best Horror

Requiem from the Darkness
Geneon Entertainment



Nominees
- Requiem from the Darkness
- Tsukihime
- Lady Death
- Demon Lord Dante

Best Network TV

Shaman King
FUNimation

Nominees
- Shaman King
- Sonic X
- F-Zero: GP Legend
- Kirby: Right Back At Ya

Best Classic/Revival

Cyborg 009
Unedited & Uncut
Columbia Tristar



Nominees
- Cyborg 009 Unedited & Uncut
- MegaZone 23
- Birth
- Robotech Remastered: Extended Edition

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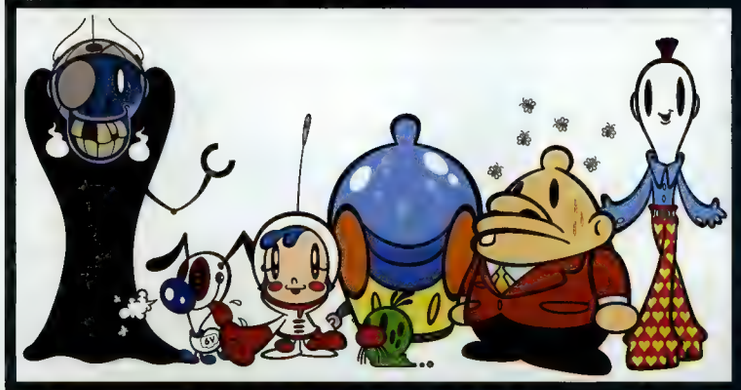
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Best Comedy

The Super Milk Chan Show



Nominees
The Super Milk Chan Show
DoKKoiDa!
Nurse Witch Komugi
Azumanga Daioh

Best Cable TV

FullMetal Alchemist

FUNimation



Nominees
FullMetal Alchemist
Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
Gundam Seed
FLCL

Best Theme Music

Ghost in the Shell
Stand Alone Complex

Bandai Entertainment/Manga Video

Best Movie

Tokyo Godfathers

Columbia Tristar

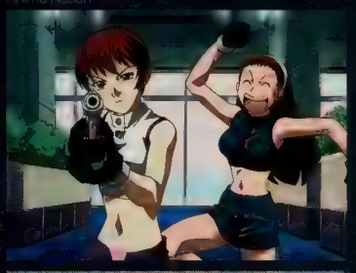


Nominees
Ghost in the Shell: Innocence
Tokyo Godfathers
Rahxephon: The Movie
Saiyuki: The Motion Picture

Best Fan Service

Miami Guns

Anime Nation



Nominees
Ikki Tousen
Miami Guns
Gravion
Mouse
Hanaukyo Maid Team

Best Fight

Pandy (and offspring) vs. her sister

Dead Leaves

Best Use of Integrated CG

Yukikaze

Bandai Entertainment

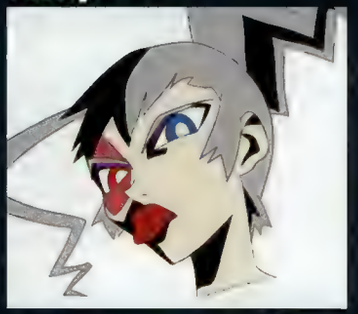


Top 5 Anime Music

01 Refrain of Evangelion
02 Gungrave OST 2
03 Tsukihime OST 1
04 Last Exile OST 2
05 Sound Wave of Stellvia

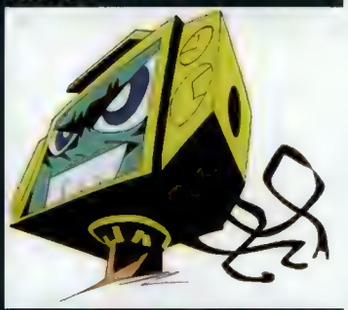
Best New Character: Female

Pandy



Best New Character: Male

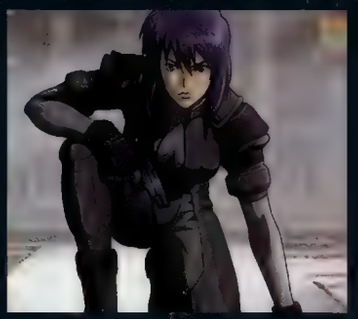
Retro



Best Returning Character: Female

Major Motoko Kusanagi

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex



Best Returning Character: Male

Jubei Kibagami

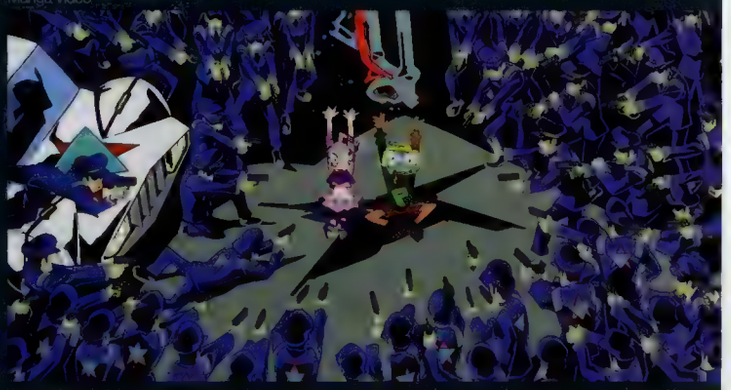
Ninja Scroll TV



Best OVA

Dead Leaves

Manga Video



Nominees
Dead Leaves
Parasite Dolls
Saber Marionette R
Yukikaze

Best Vocal Performance: Female

Mary Elizabeth McGlynn
Maj. Motoko Kusanagi

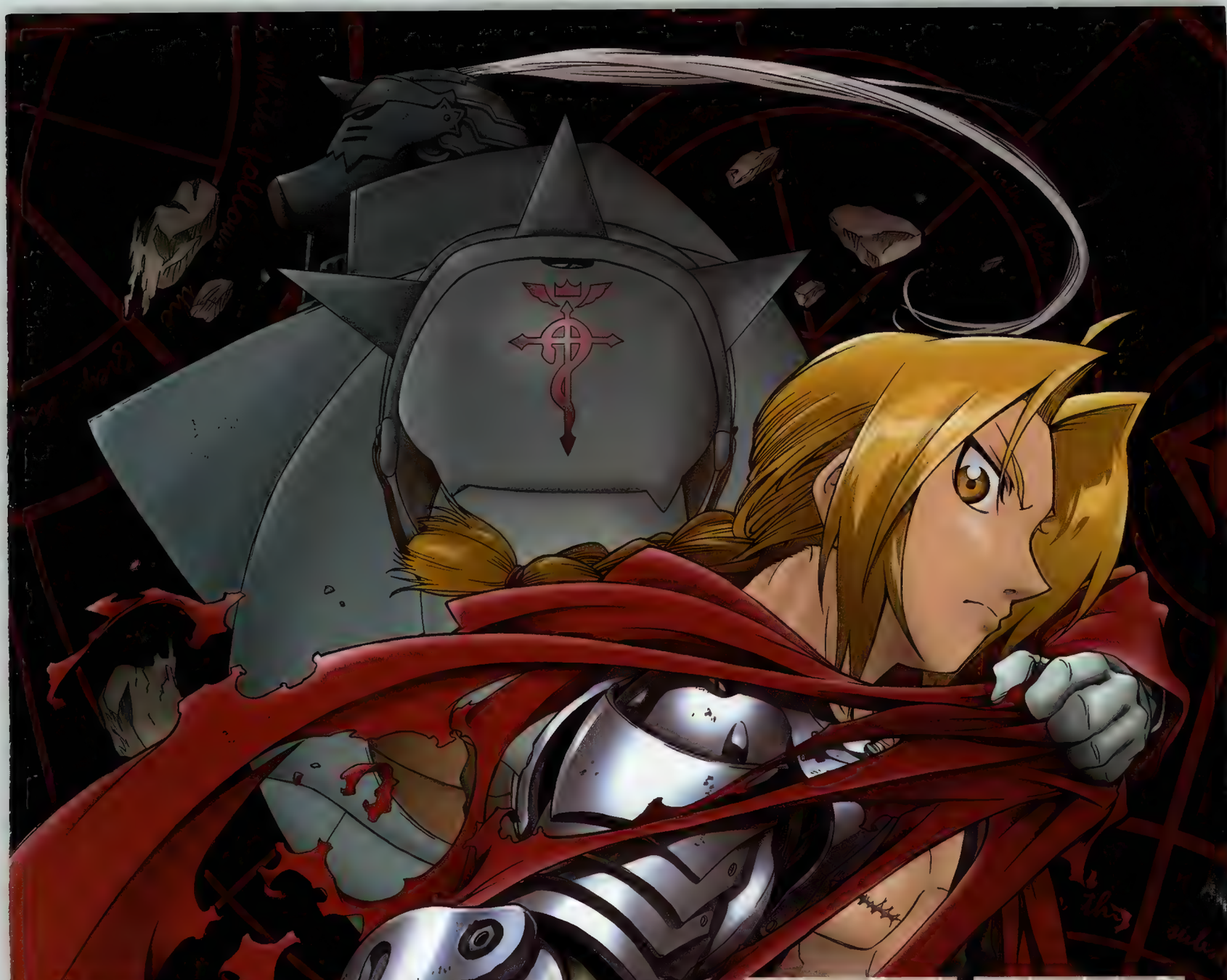
Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex



Best Vocal Performance: Male

Jason Lee
Retro





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-Zac Bertschy, Anime Insider

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Best Character Other

Tachikoma

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex



Best CG/3D Character Design

Texhnolyze Lenticular 3D series

Geneon Entertainment



Best Box Set

Robotech Remastered

ADV Films



2004 MANGA TOP 10

Read all about it

Manga, even more so than anime, is a highly subjective art form. Choosing from publications from Del Rey, CPM, ADV, Dark Horse and TokyoPop, narrowing it down to a field of 50 and then reading for hours on end, these are the 10 titles we deem hardest to put down. Hellsing and Arm of Kannon are both choice tomes of horror, while STONe, Suikoden III and Saiyuki are all extraordinary adventures. Et Cetera and Hyper Police are crazy good times in need of either anime or game treatments pronto, Ororon is a somber, mesmerizing, otherworldly fantasy/drama; the outrageous Sgt. Frog (the anime of which is headed stateside in '05) is simply gut funny; and Tokyo Tribes is the coolest bit of Tokyo style hip-hop thuggery since Jet Set Radio. Del Rey's latest offerings from Clamp, xxxholic and Reservoir Chronicle Tsubasa, which intermingle, also bear mention, just missing the cut; and we really liked Del Rey's Gundam Seed and TokyoPop's Gundam Seed Astray as well.

01 STONe



02 Et Cetera



03 Sgt. Frog



04 Hellsing



05 Suikoden III



06 Saiyuki



07 Hyper Police



08 Ororon



09 Tokyo Tribes



10 Arm of Kannon



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2004 PERSONAL TOP 10

Individual top 10s from the panel

2004 was a great year for all the anime companies on the frontlines. The Business Times reported that over $19 billion in anime-related products were sold in 2004. Anime has also begun seeping into the fabric of Hollywood, as evidenced by Production I.G's contribution to Tarantino's *Kill Bill* and James Cameron's upcoming *Battle Angel*.

The release of *Lady Death* was a major accomplishment for us this year. After three years in production, it was an awesome feeling seeing it finally hit retail. The mental and physical toll producing original animation takes has given us all a new respect for all of the amazing Japan studios churning out multiple titles every year.

One of the things I'll be watching for in 2005 (along with tons of new anime) is the Blu-ray vs. HD DVD format war. Although it is not known which format will win the technology race, Blu-ray seems to have the most support from the entertainment industry. Then again, HD DVD can be mastered and replicated using current equipment, where as Blu-ray would need all-new equipment for both jobs, so we'll see.

Dave Halverson

01 Dead Leaves
Manga Video



02 Paranoia Agent
03 Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
04 Get Backers
05 Giant Robo
06 The Daichis: Earth's Defense Family
07 Kiddy Grade
08 Mezzo: Danger Service Agency
09 Requiem from the Darkness
10 Chrono Crusade

Without *Champloo* in the mix, Retro and Pandy reigned supreme in my book. *Dead Leaves* isn't just anime, it's a ride; Production I.G has surely broken the cool barrier. Elsewhere, I can't remember a year dotted with more memorable series. *Get Backers*, *Requiem from the Darkness*, *The Daichis* and *Mezzo* were awesome surprises. *Ghost in the Shell* finally spilled into series anime (if only it were a bit more Shirow Masamune and a little less Western tinged); and we got a double-dose of Satoshi Kohn with *Tokyo Tribes* and *Paranoia Agent*. Of course, with 2005 we're already knee-deep into *Samurai Champloo* and *FullMetal Alchemist*, *Burst Angel* is right around the corner, and Miyazaki is about to humble us all once again...so buckle up and keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times.

ADV Films' Rod Peters

01 Get Backers
ADV Films



02 Gungrave
03 Chrono Crusade
04 R.O.D the TV
05 Requiem From The Darkness
06 Dead Leaves
07 Kino's Journey
08 Lady Death
09 Mezzo: Danger Service Agency
10 Kiddy Grade

Nelson Lui

01 Azumanga Daioh
ADV Films



02 Gundam SEED
03 Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
04 Paranoia Agent
05 Kaleido Star
06 DNAngel
07 R.O.D the TV
08 Get Backers
09 Kiddy Grade
10 Comic Party

As you can see based on my top picks, 2004 was a year rich in diversity. From comedy like *Azumanga Daioh* to sci-fi such as *Ghost in the Shell* and the dramatic undertones of Satoshi Kohn's *Paranoia Agent*, there was always something to watch regardless of what mood I was in. It was nice after designing the section each month to catch up on everything I've missed over the course of the year. Outside of this list, I was pleasantly surprised at the sheer amount of quality titles this year compared to last. With any luck, it will only get better in the years to come as companies like Production I.G continue to penetrate more mainstream chennels. Other than that we'll be launching Play Online soon so, maybe I'll catch you in the forums!

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geneon

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Ghost in the Shell SE**	*manga entertainment*
02	**Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence**	*dreamworks*
03	**InuYasha The Movie 2**	*viz, llc*
04	**Wolf's Rain**	*bandai entertainment*
05	**Dragon Ball GT: The Movie**	*funimation productions*
06	**Gundam SEED**	*bandai entertainment*
07	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
08	**Peace Maker**	*geneon entertainment*
09	**Fist of the North Star**	*adv films*
10	**Urda: The Third Reich**	*media blasters*

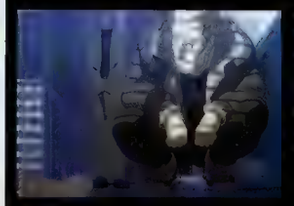


Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Ghost in the Shell SE**	*manga entertainment*
03	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
04	**Get Backers**	*adv films*
05	**New Getter Robo**	*geneon entertainment*
06	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
07	**Paranoia Agent**	*geneon entertainment*
08	**Chrono Crusade**	*adv films*
09	**Saiyuki Reload**	*geneon entertainment*
10	**Cromartie High**	*adv films*



your megastore beckons!



Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex V2
bandai/manga

Kusanagi and Section 9 deliver another powerful volume.

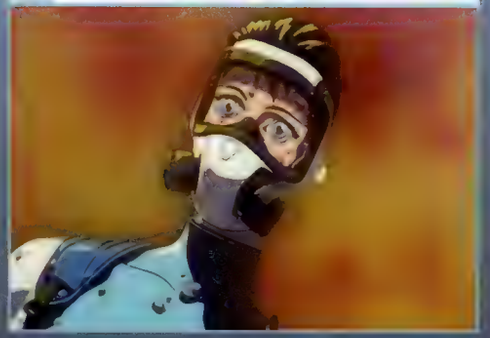


Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence
dreamworks

Thought provoking and utterly captivating in every way.

Dave Halverson

01	**Ghost in the Shell SE**	*manga entertainment*
02	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
03	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*bandai entertainment*



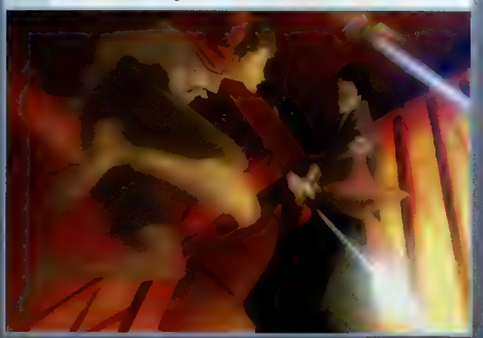
Rod Peters

01	**Cromartie High**	*adv films*
02	**Get Backers**	*adv films*
03	**Dead Leaves**	*manga entertainment*
04	**Gundam Seed**	*bandai entertainment*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*



Nelson Lui

01	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Cromartie High**	*adv films*
03	**Get Backers**	*adv films*
04	**Daphne in the Brilliant Blue**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Ultra Maniac**	*geneon entertainment*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
02	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
03	**Gundam SEED**	*bandai entertainment*
04	**Chrono Crusade**	*adv films*
05	**Gungrave**	*geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

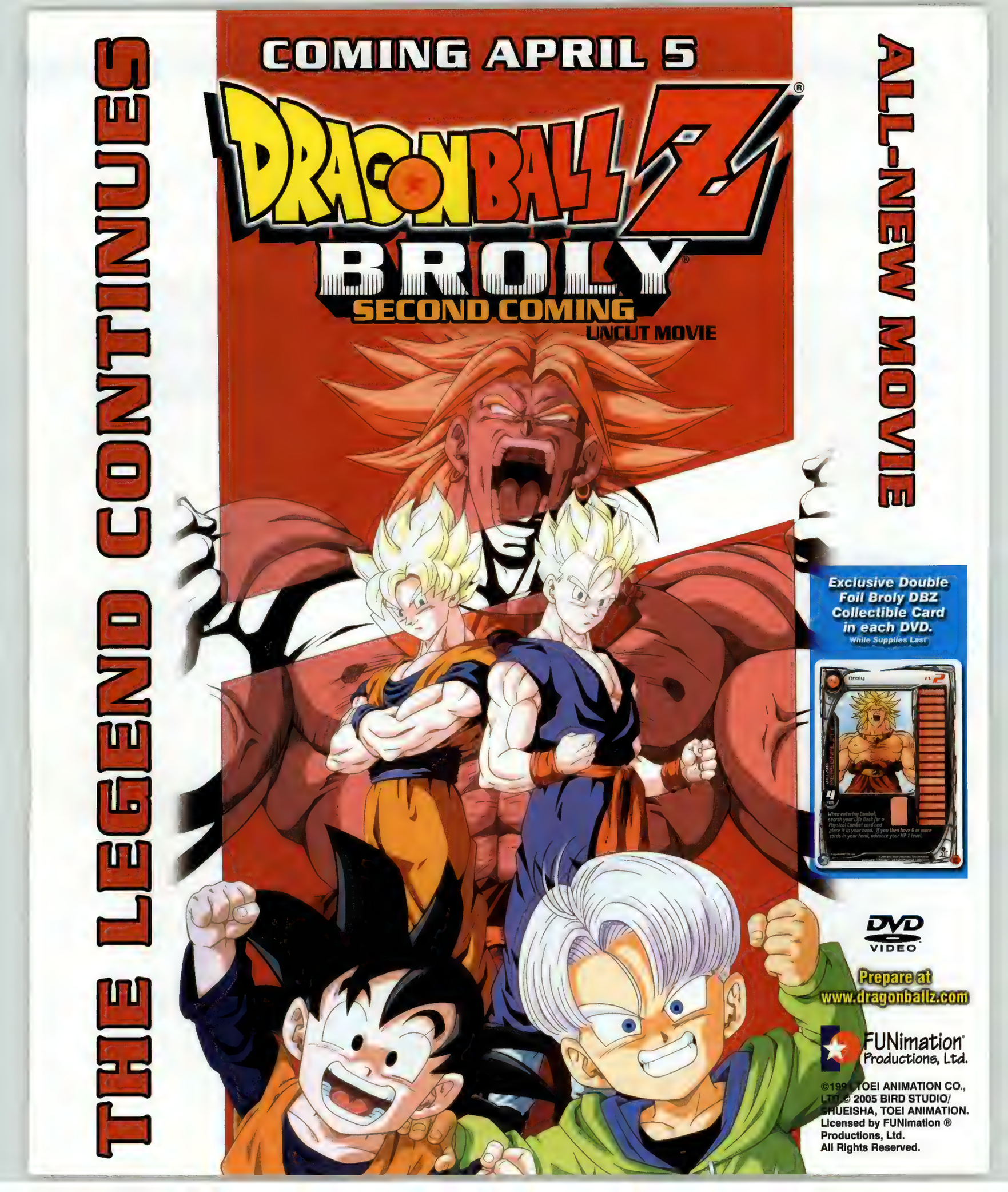
01	**STONe v2**	*tokyopop manga*
02	**Sgt. Frog v6**	*tokyopop manga*
03	**Saiyuki v3**	*tokyopop manga*
04	**Et Cetera v3**	*tokyopop manga*
05	**Gundam SEED: Astray v1**	*tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

01	**Refrain of Evangelion**	*geneon anime music*
02	**Gungrave OST**	*geneon anime music*
03	**Memories**	*geneon anime music*
04	**Sound Wave of Stellvia**	*geneon anime music*
05	**Sonic Heroes OST**	*geneon anime music*

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Catwoman

Starring: Halle Berry, Benjamin Bratt, Sharon Stone
Director: Pitof
Released By: Warner Bros.
Rated: PG-13



If you're one of the many that avoided *Catwoman* during its theatrical run only to rent or pick it up on DVD later, then the cat is already out of the bag: it's *that* bad. Layered like nails under lingerie betwixt the most comically over-the-top plot devices and overacting since Arnold donned the freeze ray, this is a crap film. The underlying expression of girl power is stomach-turning burn-your-bra bullshit, the effects palpable (although her acrobatics supply the only mildly entertaining moments) and the climax limp, if not completely humiliating. "Skin like living marble, and you can't feel a thing"… yeah, maybe it's Marbelline! I dig Halle in the suit too, but for the love of the comic book gods, make a movie at least somewhat evocative of the comic. Pitof and Uwe Boll must be roommates. If Warner Bros. is tenacious enough to do one, two words: McG sequel.
Extras: Extensive behind-the-scenes, vertigo-inducing alternate ending (lumped in with deleted scenes) and two, count 'em, two, documentaries! Dave Halverson
Movie: D Extras: B

Donnie Darko: The Director's Cut

Starring: Jake Gyllenhaal, Jena Malone, Drew Barrymore, Beth Grant, Mary McDonnell, Patrick Swayze, Noah Wyle
Director: Richard Kelly
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: R



The most thought-provoking work of fiction I've seen since *Heathers*, Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* is quite simply a masterpiece. I won't even pretend to understand the full breadth of its doctrine, but it will linger in my psyche (much the same way works of non-fiction like *City of God* has and *Million Dollar Baby* will) for years to come. The story, about a high school student haunted by an imaginary friend come prophet in a demonic rabbit suit, is like a big mousetrap, placing us in a transcendental state only to snap down on our altered state as the grand epiphany delivers us into the story's mystifying finale. M. Night, eat your heart out.
Extras: Re-released with purpose, the alt disc is why DVD was invented. Beyond the usual token making-of drivel, *DD* disc 2 goes deep into *Darko* fandom (there's actually a cult) including a Darkomentary by *DD*'s number-one fan. Now that's entertainment. Dave Halverson
Movie: A Extras: A

Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow

Starring: Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie
Director: Kerry Conran
Released By: Paramount Home Video
Rated: PG

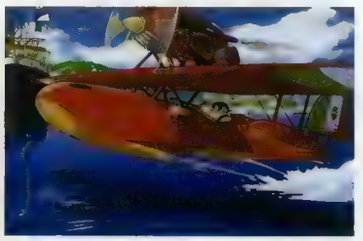




Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow feels like a movie that was made in the '80s, when such charmers like *Indiana Jones* wowed our adventurous wonder. There's a free-spirited joy and innocence about it, a gee-wiz spectacle that's far more exciting than most dumb action movies we've had to endure this year. Because nearly everything is CG, you might expect an incredibly artificial tone to *Sky Captain*, but there's a nice dimensionality to it all, thanks to first-time director Kerry Conran's keen use of camera movement and spectacularly conceived sets. There's a thin story that serves as nothing more than a wind-up to the eye candy of fantastical gadgetries and a completely made-up Art Deco world that soaks up everything from black-and-white sci-fi to pulp fictions, and yet a warmth to the characters is still present to carry us through the quieter moments. Perhaps you might demand more than giant robots and evil scientists out to destroy all, and to receive more would have certainly catapulted the film into greater territory. What's here is handled well, straying from dumb jokes and senseless bantering, freeing us to sit back and simply soak in the wild imagination that zips off the screen.
Extras: The movie originated from a six-minute short Conran cooked up on his Mac, which is included. A couple commentaries are fairly informative. A Brave New World featurette is the best of the bunch here, taking a detailed look at the creation of *Sky Captain*, adding in several interviews across the production board. The Art of World of Tomorrow is a way-too-short look into the influence and process behind bringing the film to life. Brady Fiechter **Movie: B+ Extras: B+**

The Cat Returns
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind
Porco Rosso

Directors: Hayao Miyazaki, Hiroyuki Morita
Released By: Buena Vista
Rated: G-PG



When the greats like Disney and Pixar cite your work as eternal inspiration, your place in history is set. Writer/director/visionary Hayao Miyazaki's work should be seen by anyone who considers themselves even remotely a fan of movies, and the latest release of his work may not be his very best, but each represents a beautiful slice of the animation genius' fertile mind—a dwelling of creativity and gentle wonder unlike anything out there. My favorite of these newest DVDs is *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, with its wild flights of pastoral, sci-fi-tinged fantasy and strange creations, about a princess warrior who faces the environmental destruction of a world and her race. As a comedy—a bit removed from the typical Miyazaki tone—*Porco Rosso* is, well, wonderfully different: an Italian World War I pilot turns into a pig, and strives to find normalcy through a number of wild and awkward moments. *The Cat Returns* was originally conceived as a Miyazaki short and turned into a feature in the hands of animator-turned-director Hiroyuki Morita. If only more subdued and less assured than their typical work, the movie feels every bit Studio Ghibli, magical and humanized beyond the norm. Gorgeously painted with a delicate water-color aesthetic, the movie tells a simple story about a little girl who deals with the consequences of saving a talking cat, the prince of the Cat World. All these works contain some meditative spirit, a challenging weight that transfixes even in the most unlikely moments. A subtle message resides in places, and sometimes the films are nothing more than visual delights to lose yourself in.
Extras: Each has a light look at the voice recording, Behind the Microphone, along with extensive storyboards—which get old pretty quickly, yet for the obsessed fans are a worthy addition. The most enlightening of the bunch is a behind-the-scenes look at Studio Ghibli in *Nausicaä*. A short making-of rounds out *The Cat Returns*. Brady Fiechter
The Cat Returns: B+ Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind: A Porco Rosso: A- All Extras: B-

Shark Tale

Starring: Will Smith, Robert DeNiro, Renee Zellweger, Angelina Jolie
Director: Bibo Bergeron, Vicky Jenson, Rob Letterman
Released By: Dreamworks
Rated: PG



Shark Tale made a truckload of money but got a bit of a bad rap for being too cliché for adults and over most kids' heads (although my 4-year-old busted up more than a few times). While it is guilty on both counts to some degree, there's way more good here than bad. DeNiro, Scorsese, Jolie, Zellweger, Black and, yes, Mr. Smith are perfectly cast in their fishy alter egos, and the story's mob satire is delightfully played out. The usual and unfortunate hip-hop pandering and ethnic stereotyping do their best to sink the ship, but those minor irritations aside, *Shark Tale* is an engaging bit of CG magic. It's definitely not on par with trendsetters like *Shrek*, *Ice Age*, *Toy Story*, *Monsters Inc.* or *The Incredibles*, but it's definitely one for the collection, especially if you have crazy *Power Ranger*-addled kids.
Extras: Extensive would be putting it lightly. Gigi the Whale short, director's commentary, gag reel, behind-the-scenes, music featurette, making-of, Club Oscar, cast featurette and a host of DreamWorks kids' games and activities. Dave Halverson
Movie: B Extras: A

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Castlevania

The Belmont Legacy

Ready the holy water, equip your cross... Castlevania has come to the comic book realm

words: Chris Hoffman

It's turning out to be a great year to be a Castlevania fan. Early signs indicate that both the new 2D Castlevania on the DS and Castlevania: Curse of Darkness on PS2 will be absolutely astounding. But while we await the fall release of the new games, something else is in store for Dracula's legions of followers: Castlevania: The Belmont Legacy, the latest Konami-licensed comic book from IDW Publishing, following their success with Silent Hill and Metal Gear Solid. Written by Marc Andreyko (known for Manhunter and Casefiles: Sam & Twitch among others) and illustrated by E.J. Su (G.I. Joe vs. Transformers II), this five-issue miniseries is an adaptation of The Castlevania Adventure—the black-and-white Game Boy classic released way back in 1989.

The setting is Romania, 1576. The land has been at peace for nearly a century, and Christopher Belmont, heir to the title of vampire killer, is set to be wed. Unfortunately for him, the inevitable resurrection of Dracula is at hand, and the vampire's wedding gift to Christopher is the kidnapping of his new bride, Illyana. From there, rivers of blood flow as Dracula's followers terrorize the Romanian countryside, and Christopher, aided by the vampire-hunting Tatoyan family, makes haste to find Dracula's stronghold, rescue his beloved and send the Count back to the dust from whence he came. We spoke with writer Marc Andreyko to find out what else fans can expect to sink their fangs into when the comic arrives on store shelves this March.

"...rivers of blood flow as Dracula's followers terrorize the Romanian countryside, and Christopher... makes haste to find Dracula's stronghold..."

"There will be lots of grand romance, adventure and gruesome horror...all the primal emotions that make reading, watching or playing Castlevania so much fun."

play: At long last, the world is finally getting a Castlevania comic! Why do you think it's taken so long for someone to tap into Castlevania as a licensed property (Captain N aside)?
Marc Andreyko: I know Castlevania has been around for a looooong time, and I, too, am really surprised it hasn't made the leap into comics sooner. I have no idea why it took 'til now, but I'm glad to be a part of it.

Does it feel like a big responsibility to handle such an enduring game legacy?
Well, to paraphrase a friend, every character is someone's favorite, so I take any job using pre-existing characters very seriously.

Do you have a lot of experience with the Castlevania games? If so, when did you become a fan of the game series, and which game is your favorite?
I can't claim to have played all the Castlevania games, but I did play a lot of Lament of Innocence, which is probably my favorite game in the series.

Did you do any special preparations to ready you for creating the comic?
When IDW first approached me about the project, I immediately started surfing the net and discovered the many elaborate Castlevania fan sites. After reading up on the various incarnations of the game and the timeline/history of the characters, I was fascinated by the worlds created by the Konami folks.

Then when I started telling my friends about the job, all of them started hitting me with their favorite versions of Castlevania and characters, so I had a wealth of info at my fingertips.

What made you decide to make Christopher Belmont the main character? Why use this relatively obscure period of Castlevania history as the basis?
I chose this obscure period for just that reason. It would allow me to explore and fill in a piece of Castlevania history that hadn't really been explored. That gave me some freedom as a writer to tell an "honest" story and not try to shoehorn something into a bit of the game where it wouldn't fit.



Does it feel at all unusual to base the comic on a 16-year-old Game Boy game instead of one of the more recent incarnations?
Not at all. Maybe this mini-series will rekindle some nostalgia for that game and lead to a modern revamp of it.

Why even make it based on a particular game at all? Why not just create a new installment in the Castlevania mythos?
Konami is constantly working on new installments of their properties, so trying to do a totally new story would be difficult so as to not contradict anything they are working on.

What kind of a feel are you going for with the comic? Will a sense of horror be a primary focus?
I'm trying to do justice to the history of the game with the flavor of a Hammer horror film—you know, those great ones from the '60s with Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing—thrown in. There will be lots of grand romance, adventure and gruesome horror... all the primal emotions that make reading, watching or playing Castlevania so much fun.

Will it be bloodier than the games, more mature?
The comic book is about a PG-13—mostly for the blood and violence. There is no profanity or graphic sex.

How true to the game will the comic be? Will boss characters and settings from the game appear, or is it just the story that's being used? Any flying Medusa heads?
Nope, no flying Medusa heads this time. But maybe later.

What other elements in the comic will make fans know that this is truly Castlevania?
The approval of Konami over every aspect of the book! I think that's pretty much all you need, right?

How do you feel about the level of creative freedom you have? Has Castlevania series producer Koji Igarashi provided any feedback for guiding the comic?
I have been having a ball on this book. There have only been the smallest of notes from Konami, so I think they're pleased with the progress of the book. And I have never had the pleasure of dealing with Koji Igarashi directly. I would love to someday. Maybe a sequel series?

Who are the Tatoyans? Did you create them, or do they have any actual historical basis?
They are a family tied to the Belmonts' history in Transylvania that I created for this story in order to flesh out the plot and give Chris a few more foils to play off of.

For that matter, Castlevania has usually been about one guy fighting Dracula, so why have other heroes besides Christopher?
Well, when this series starts, Drac has been gone for almost a century, so Chris needs someone to help bring him up to speed on his family's bloodline and duty. And someone had to watch the whip all those years!

What are the chances of seeing fan-favorite character Alucard show up in this series?
None in this one. Sorry!

If this series is successful—and I certainly hope it will be—would you like to continue with another installment? If so, are there any other periods of Castlevania's history you'd like to tackle?

I've had so much fun in this tiny corner of the Castlevania world that I would love to explore more of it. Hopefully, the fans will like the book enough that IDW has reason to do another (and, hopefully, bring me along for the ride!)

Anything else you'd like to say to get Castlevania fans enthused about The Belmont Legacy?
All I can say is that I am extremely proud of the finished product (wait 'til you see the final, colored art from E.J. Su! It is breathtaking!) and I think the fans will have a fun ride should they choose to take it!
play





Left: E.J. Su's interior pages of Castlevania: The Belmont Legacy #1

Show Report

CES 2005

There was so much going on at CES this year, to be quite honest, it was all a blur. Some 150,000 attendees representing 115 countries spread across a million-plus square feet of convention space? Then you throw in the booth babes, the parties and the Vegas strip clubs? Needless to say, I'm lucky to have made it out alive. 2004 was a killer year for consumer electronics, and from the way things were looking at the show, 2005 is shaping up to be a better one. Wireless was big at CES, as well as storage, connectivity and video. "Convergence" reared its ugly head as companies were pimping out digital home entertainment services, HD PVRs and more MP3 players than you could shake a stick at. No question, the consumer electronics industry is thriving and all of us are the ones who are benefiting from it.

words Tom Ham

photos Michael Tran

Product Highlights

Olympus MR-500i

Details: With all of the hype surrounding Apple's iPod, it's nice to see cool new products that take innovation seriously and deliver something that is truly unique in design and execution. Introducing the MR-500i, one of two new products in the Olympus m:robe series of digital music players. Sexier than an iPod, the MR-500i proves that portable storage devices can be dynamic as well as captivating.

On the surface, the MR-500i may look like any other MP3 player, but after you turn it on, all similarities disappear. For starters, it has a 3.7-inch color VGA LCD display. Utilizing a touch-screen interface, users can access their music and images by simply using their finger. Measuring a mere 4.3 inches wide and 2.89 high and weighing less than 7.4 ounces, there is no reason why you can't have your pictures and music with you wherever you go. With 20 gigabytes of hard drive space, you can store hundreds of images and up to 5,000 songs (in either WMA or MP3 format). There is even a 1.22-megapixel digital camera built-in—so you'll never lose that special shot.
Price: $499.99



















From Cheap Trick jamming live to CART cars for all to see (among other things), CES is always filled with killer sights and sounds.

Samsung HPR8072

Details: You want bragging rights? How about having the biggest plasma television on the market? Samsung's HPR8072 measures 80 inches and has a resolution of 1920x1080—hang this baby on your wall and you basically have video nirvana.

With a high brightness and contrast ratio (1500cd/m2 and 5000:1, respectively) and 12-bit processing, the HPR8072 puts out a mind-blowing 68.7 billion displayable colors. Of all the plasmas at the show, this one impressed me the most.

Price: $40,000



Siemens SX66

Details: The cell phone has finally grown up. Now, we're not talking about PDA and phone combos getting better with snazzier ring tones and cameras. What we're talking about is bringing cell phones into the "indispensable" category. Showcasing new operating systems, faster processors and new form factors, cell phones have now evolved into *smartphones*.

Siemens' latest, the SX66, is the ultimate in smartphones. Perfect for road warriors and early adopters, the SX66 is a full-featured Pocket PC and quad-band GSM phone all in one. Forget the Treo and toss your Blackberry; this is the only device you'll need.

What I liked most about the SX66 was the full QWERTY keyboard that is hidden behind the handheld display. Just push ever so slightly on the face to reveal it. The big 3.5-inch TFT display shows off 64,000 colors—perfect for Windows Mobile applications.

Key features include Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, infrared, voice recorder, email, text messaging, speakerphone and an integrated MP3 player.

Price: $499.99





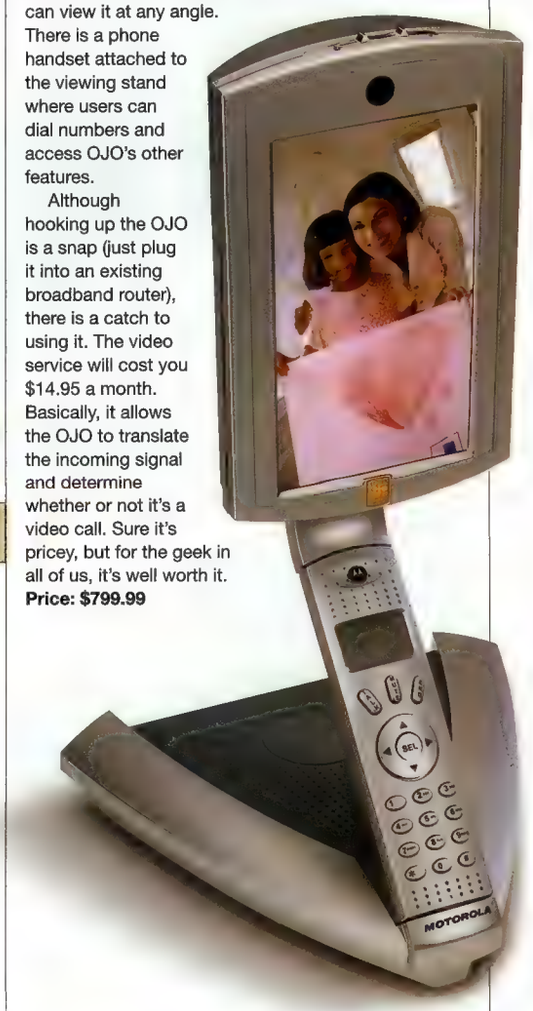
Motorola OJO Personal Videophone

Details: What was once fantasy is now reality: introducing the Motorola OJO—a videophone that actually works. Imagine being able to send full-motion video, in real-time, over the Internet at a phenomenal 30fps (broadcast TV quality).

Sitting close to eye level, the beautiful 6-by-3.5-inch display shows off crystal-clear video at high resolution. The cool thing is, you can view it at any angle. There is a phone handset attached to the viewing stand where users can dial numbers and access OJO's other features.

Although hooking up the OJO is a snap (just plug it into an existing broadband router), there is a catch to using it. The video service will cost you $14.95 a month. Basically, it allows the OJO to translate the incoming signal and determine whether or not it's a video call. Sure it's pricey, but for the geek in all of us, it's well worth it.

Price: $799.99



Sony Cyber-Shot DSC-M1



Details: Sure there were a lot of digital cameras at CES this year, but the DSC-M1 really impressed me. With its slick 2.5-inch full-color LCD that swivels and matte-black finish, watch everyone take notice when you whip out this bad boy at your next party.

Sporting a Carl Zeiss Vario-Tessar Lens, the M1 is capable of 3X Optical Zoom with brilliant clarity. The Real Imaging Processor circuit allows users to shoot rapid shots in succession and also enhances the speed of advanced features such as auto-exposure and auto-white balance. And at 5.1 megapixels, the M1 will satisfy camera enthusiasts as well as point-and-clickers. For videophiles, the M1 can capture and play back up to 27 minutes of VGA-resolution, 30 fps video with stereo sound.

Price: $549.99

HP Z545-b Digital Entertainment Center

Details: Remember the first time you tried TiVo? You probably wondered how you ever lived without it. After you try out the HP Z545-b Digital Entertainment Center, you're going to feel the same way. Imagine having one central hub where all of your digital entertainment can be accessed with a touch of your remote from the comfort of your couch.

Basically, the Z545-b is a PC—a 3.0GHz Intel P4 Processor 530 with Hyper-Threading to be exact. Using Microsoft Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005, the Z545-b allows users to access all of their digital entertainment—pictures, movie files, TV shows, MP3s—and play them through your home stereo and television. With its built-in PVR functionality, you can also record your favorite TV show. And using the built-in DVD+/-RW drive, you can put your shows on DVD. Other goodies include a 360GB hard drive, USB 2.0, FireWire, 10/100/1000 Ethernet connection and a 9-in-1 media card reader.

Price: $2,599.99



Delphi MyFi

Details: It's no secret that XM satellite radio rocks. Commercial-free digital music? Over 130 digital channels? If you haven't jumped on the bandwagon, you're really missing out. Now Delphi (the makers of the phenomenal Roady) has created the first personal and portable XM satellite radio, the MyFi. Measuring 4.5" high, 2.8" wide and 1.2" deep and weighing just 7.2 ounces, the MyFi is just slightly bigger than an iPod. Although it's certainly not an iPod killer, the MyFi is an extraordinary piece of personal audio hardware.

What's cool is that there are two ways to listen to XM programming. The first is Direct mode—basically, you tune in and listen to one of the 130 channels as you normally would on a regular XM unit. The second is more compelling—Memory Mode. Here users can store up to five hours of XM content and listen to it later. No computer is required; it does it all from the satellite. Pretty slick.

Price: $349.99



SurroundWorks SPS110

Details: Amidst all of the booming 5.1, 6.1 and 7.1 home theatre systems, what got my attention at the show was a simple 1.1 system. Introducing the SPS110 from Cambridge SoundWorks. Basically for folks who want to simplify their home theatre setup, the SurroundWorks is simply a main speaker, a subwoofer and a DVD tuner/amplifier. How does it work? It's really quite amazing.

The system utilizes Binaura Audio Surround Processor technology, which reproduces three-dimensional 5.1 sound from a single speaker. When paired with the powerful 225-watt subwoofer, the sound quality is phenomenal. You can actually "hear" the surround sounds coming from behind you.

The DVD Tuner/Preamplifier supports CD, VCD, DVD, DVD Audio, JPEG and MP3 playback. Dolby Digital, DTS and Dolby Pro-Logic II surround decoding also comes standard. Other features include progressive scan component video outputs, optical input and a pre-programmed IR remote control.



Alpine NVE-N872A Navigation System



Details: When an in-vehicle navigation system wins the JD Power award four times in six years, you gotta take notice. The NVE-N872A is the fourth-generation satellite-linked navigation system from Alpine, and it was by far the coolest car product at CES this year. You may have nav in your car, but it pales in comparison to this.

What's so cool about it? Built into the NVE-N872A is the Real Time Traffic Data Receiver, powered by NAVTEQ Traffic, which automatically directs drivers away from traffic congestion and accidents—in real time. So suppose you want to go home from work but want to avoid any traffic that is going under 45 MPH. Just input your parameters and the unit will direct you where to go. The system provides real-time traffic updates every three minutes.

What I liked so much about this is that it will give people peace of mind. Nothing is worse than driving along and then all of sudden—BAM! You're down to a crawl. If you know about it before hand, then you can either mentally prepare for it or, with the NVE-N872A, find another way home.

Slingbox Personal Broadcaster

Details: You're probably thinking, "Sling-what?" That's exactly what I thought, but after seeing what this thing can do, trust me—you're going to want one too.

In a nutshell, the Slingbox redirects or, as the manufacturer likes to say, "placeshifts" the TV signal from any cable box, PVR and satellite receiver to any location or device. So whether you're down the hall or in a hotel room in Tokyo, as long as you're connected to a high-speed connection, you can watch recorded or live television anywhere. Yeah, it's pretty freaking cool.

How does it work? The Slingbox imports the analog output, then digitizes and compresses it. Sling Media's proprietary software optimizes playback over the Internet. The Slingbox has S-Video, analog cable and Ethernet inputs. Sling Media is planning on releasing software later this year that will allow users to watch their content on Wi-Fi-enabled PDAs and third-generation cell phones.

Price: $249.99



Worthy Mentions

Maxxsonics' MaxxBlaster 2.1
Details: A leader in car audio, Maxxsonics now wants you to experience booming sound for your games. Looking like something out of a movie, the MaxxBlaster 2.1 has pretty impressive spatial-sound performance—the small rocket-shaped speakers really perform. When coupled with its 80-watt subwoofer, the sound quality was comparable to 5.1 systems double in price.
Price: $249.95

Nyko PSP Charger Case
Details: With the PSP launching this spring (hopefully), there were plenty of products at CES getting ready for it. Nyko's PSP Charger Case really caught my eye. Not just because it looked cool with its slick brushed aluminum design, but the fact it was a charger as well. In fact, it will more than triple the PSP play time. The built-in power supply will fully recharge the PSP three times before it needs to recharge itself. Simply brilliant.
Price:TBD

SanDisk Gaming Memory
Details: SanDisk, a leader in flash memory data storage, announced the 1GB Gaming Memory Stick PRO Duo for the PSP. Although the price hasn't been announced yet, this is going to be a must-buy for anyone who is getting a PSP. Since the PSP can play back MP3s, digital pictures and movie files, you're going to need as much space as possible. SanDisk will have you covered.
Price:TBD

USB Victorinox
Details: Sure, those USB flash drives are great, but let's be honest: they really don't have a "cool" factor about them—that is, until now. From the folks who make Swiss Army knives comes their latest, the USB Victorinox. In addition to the flash drive, there is also a knife, scissors and an integrated LED light. MacGyver, eat your heart out.
Price:512MB - $159.00, 256MB - $114.00, 128MB - $82.00

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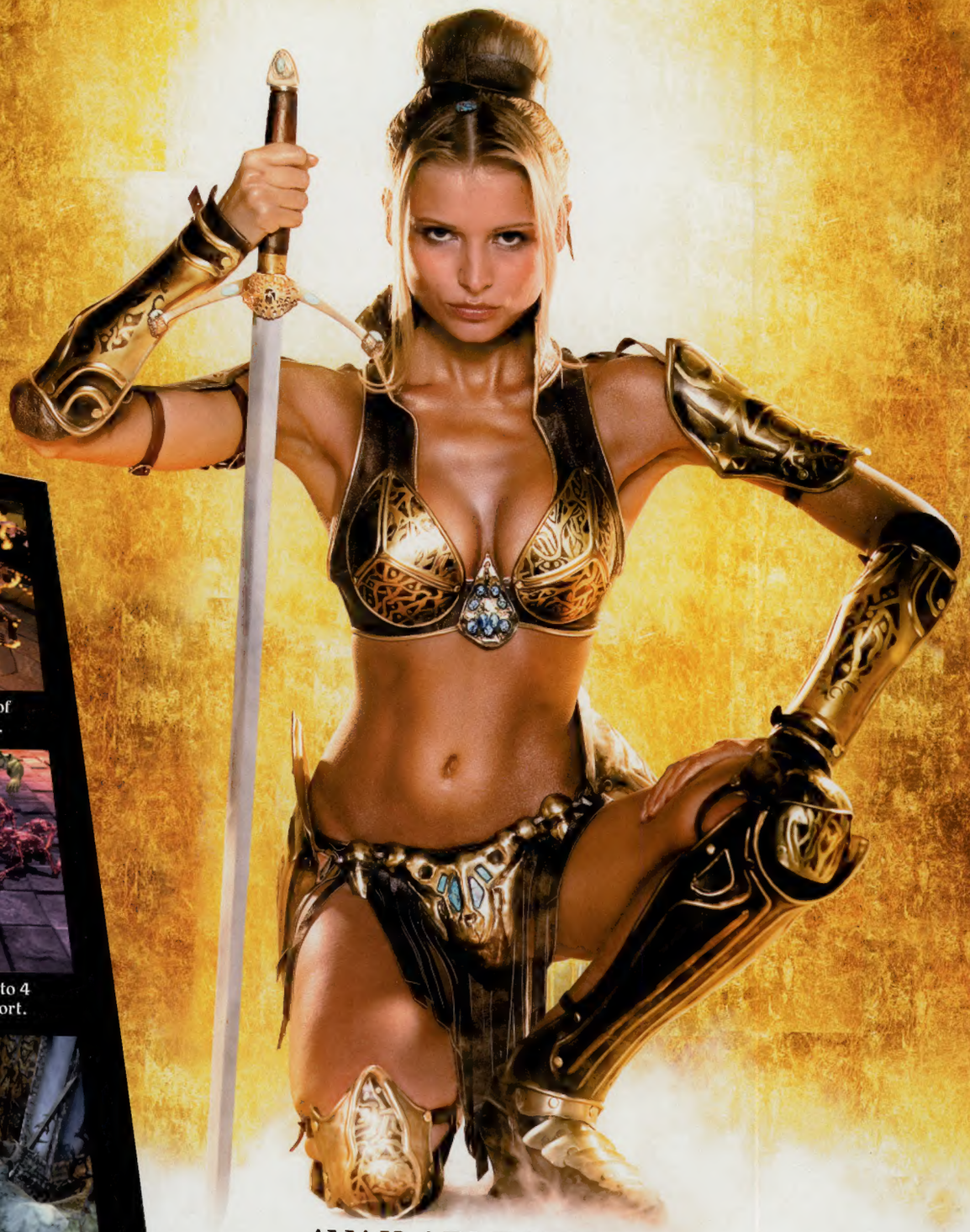
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